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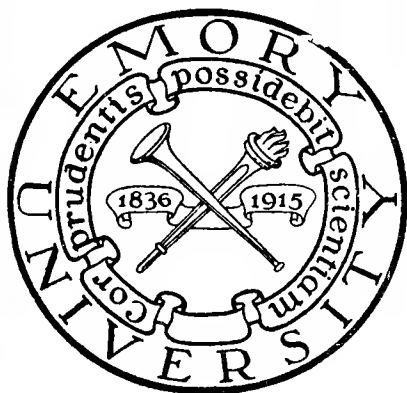
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H A G A R E N E.



HAGARENE.



CHAPTER I.

THE TRIAL.

SINCE Cain came to man's estate, a tinge of Communism, howsoever faint, has infected most polities, howsoever small.

Even in Hierocratic Elis, might have been found malcontents who spake evil of dignities, and laughed covertly at the beards of Hellanodicæ. Yet I doubt if any one of these pestilent knaves murmured in his heart, because the plain, shadowed by the Cronian cliffs, and washed by the double stream of Alpheus, lay barren through cycles of Olympiads ; whilst in the grove of Altis flourished no rarer tree than wild olives, fit only for the weaving of crowns. There is no accounting for the vagaries of fanaticism ; and the precisians, bitterer than the old Iconoclasts, who have turned the day of rest into a day of penance, would have made coin of the Silver Bell, could they have wrought their will at Kelso. But, as a rule, throughout all ages, reformers and economists have shown some indulgence to purely national pastimes. *Panem et Circenses*. There was common sense in that petition, after all. Even in these later days, when disentailing, disforesting, and "disannulling" of

every kind are so much in fashion, none have yet advocated the enforced enclosure of "the Heath"—its being private property is quite beside the question—or the breaking up of any race-course in actual use; and to very few of the breezy uplands where our thoroughbreds are trained, has this century brought change.

Therefore, so far as the surroundings are concerned, it would need no strong effort of imagination to fancy Baron Down near twenty years ago.

The same clump of stunted firs, bent all the same way by the sea-winds, that must needs have been planted for a landmark, inasmuch as for shelter or ornament they never could serve; under your feet the same short soft turf—elastic despite of drought, firm despite of rain, and, after frost has bitten deep into the clay-lands, carrying little "bone." Only, now-a-days, every tuft and shrub that could hide a rook is close shaven; whereas then, the Down was dotted with frequent patches of gorse, and skirted by a broad furze-brake, that not seldom harboured a stout hill-fox.

Early morning. So early that the dull, grey sky is still faintly flushed in the east; but the sun, though fairly risen, has no power yet to pierce the mists hanging heavily to seaward—more heavily yet over the flat, low champaign stretching far inland from the foot of the Downs. The ridge, just here, widens out into a broad stretch of table-land, crescent-shaped, but of gentle curve, and rising steadily—in parts almost imperceptibly—for near a mile, to the topmost point, marked by that same clump of firs; beyond this the ground lies perfectly flat for about a furlong, and then begins to rend downwards with a steeper incline.

Within the shadow of the trees two men are standing, who are evidently here with a purpose; for the face of one is anxious, to say the least of it, whilst the other, in his preoccupation, pulls hard at an unlighted cigar. It is not hard to guess their relation to each other; for the stamp of patrician and plebeian is very legible.

Take first Martin Wyatt, the trainer. In early youth he was

A something pottle bellied boy;

and, whilst acquiring no mean renown as a light-weight

jockey, only held his own by dint of severe wasting. With great internal satisfaction, after landing the *coup* that made a man of him, he doffed racing-gear for good ; and, since then, having ceased to mortify the flesh, he has "furnished" considerably. But it is a dapper figure, albeit rotund, and matches well with the plump rosy face on which neither time nor care have left a wrinkle. He is smoothly shaven, of course, after the fashion of his kind ; for even now when beards wag in the Temple Hall, and not a few of our pastors are even as the pard, we have yet to see the anomaly of a hairsute trainer. Early or late, at home or abroad, at work or at play, from the crown of his low broad-brimmed beaver to the lowest button of his close-fitting overalls, in a quiet, unpretending way his dress seems always singularly suited to the occasion.

A striking contrast to Martin Wyatt is his companion.

A very tall personable man, massive as yet, rather than ponderous of frame ; with a face that impresses every one favourably who scans it not closely and in detail ; a broad clear brow, and eyes expressive, as a rule, of nothing worse than a good-humoured shrewdness : but a full flowing beard cannot quite disguise the evil curve of the thick sensual lips and a heavy cruel jaw. Near a quarter of a century has slipped away since Alured, Viscount Ormskirke, appeared in the Army List as cornet of horse ; and, since then, he has "lived" all his days, and most of his nights, for that matter ; but, save that a complexion, always florid, has grown more deeply sanguine, on his countenance there are few traces of excess, and his air of vigorous health still vexes with envy the souls of divers weaker brethren ; whilst he carries his head so erect that, to strangers, he seems to carry it haughtily. This, however, is a mistake, for there breathes no more affable aristocrat ; indeed, kind friends are wont to say that if the viscount had stood more punctiliously on his dignity, it would have been better for his morals, if not for his manners. By reason of his physical energy he can scarcely be called indolent ; but the world has seldom held a more thorough-paced idler : the sense of duty, or of obligation, has ever been to him equally irksome. For instance, during his brief soldiering, to be in time for first parade was an

incessant effort and grief ; but he never grudges dressing by candle-light to be in time for a distant meet ; and, on this very morning, he must have been afoot long before dawn.

To be sure, the present occasion is rather an exception to the rule ; for if Ormskirke ever had a serious business in life it is racing, and, of late, it has ceased to be a mere pastime. His eyes are earnest enough now as they gaze down the table-land ; and his double race-glass comes up, quick as thought, as two horses, seemingly at top speed, sweep round the angle of the gorse-cover nearly abreast.

"The young one leads, by —— !" Ormskirke mutters between his teeth, biting deep into his cigar.

Martin shakes his head, rather solemnly than despondently.

"On sufferance, I'm thinking, my lord. I bade Jim not come in earnest till he got the office ; and he is a rare boy to mind orders."

There is silence for a few seconds ; then the trainer steps out well beyond the shadow of the trees, and signals with his hat. An inexperienced eye would detect no increase of speed ; but the rearward horse, beginning to make up his ground steadily, draws up to the leader's girth, and so creeps on, inch by inch, till the noses of the pair are level, at fifty yards from the spot where Wyatt stands, as if he were carven in stone, with his hat held at arm's-length in air. Then the set-to begins.

A really fine finish. You might visit a dozen country meetings, and the Heath itself twice or thrice, without witnessing better : there is no leather-plating form here ; and it is plain that ordinary stable-boys are not up—equally plain that both are doing all they know. Only the off-side rider, sparing not the spur, is not quite so hard on his horse as the other, who supplements other punishment with a couple of "side-binders," that whistle through the still morning. Incontinently the lean ugly head forges in front ; then the ragged quarters draw themselves clear, and the brown shoots past the clump, winner by a liberal length.

Wyatt's arm sinks deliberately, like a railway signal ; whilst the better half of Lord Ormskirke's cigar drops to earth, severed clean by the strong sharp teeth ; and his

brow lowers as he too strides out into the light. But the trainer's face betrays no discontent or disquietude.

"The Pirate made a good fight of it, didn't he, my lord?" he inquires in a slow soft voice, retaining just enough of the burr to show that the speaker was born within ken of the Dales.

"Not good enough," the other answers sullenly. "It was a five-pound beating at the least. Jim might have made that length two, if he had come sooner."

Once more Wyatt shakes his head, this time in mild dissent.

"I scarce think so, my lord. Though he is such a rogue betwixt ropes, you may trust old Belshazzar at home: I never saddled a safer trial-horse. If you look at his sides, you'll find he was asked the question in earnest, and that he hadn't so much in hand. But we'll call it a seven-pound beating, and then ——"

The trainer's tongue and foot halt together. They have advanced to meet the horses, now returning at a walk. From the corners of his lips to the corners of his eyes wrinkles a slow, shrewd smile; and he peers round warily, motioning to the other to bend his ear low. An excess of precaution surely; for the riders are out of earshot, and the only other creature in sight is a girl, so busy at mushrooming that she scarce raised herself from the stooping posture as the race shot past. The secret would seem safe even from the birds who carry such matters: nevertheless, Wyatt's voice sinks to the wariest whisper. His words are few and brief; but they suffice to make Ormskirke's face lighten and his eyes kindle.

"You're sure of this—quite sure?"

The trainer's comfortable chuckle was good to hear.

"Nothing's sure but death, they say. But there's no mistake here, unless Will has dropped his weights; and that don't often happen when *I* saddle 'em. He didn't know what he carried either. A promising lad, my lord, and I warrant him honest: but young tongues wag fast; and I don't tell him everything, though he *is* my own sister's son."

No time for more; for the riders are close upon them now, and halt at a beckon of the trainer's hand. Neither

animal seems much the worse for the spin. The flanks of both are heaving still, and quivering, from the severe punishment; but the slashing bay colt carries his handsome head jauntily, and through his wide nostrils the quick breaths come even and strong; whilst old Belshazzar, glancing askance out of his vicious red eye, snorts defiantly, as though he would fain savage his stable-companion for giving him so much trouble.

Nevertheless, Wyatt's face is grave, even to anxiety, as he passes the Pirate through rigid scrutiny: not a muscle or sinew, from stifle to fetlock, escapes his hand, light yet sensitive as a skilful surgeon's, and able to detect the slightest puff or strain, were it no more than the fraying of a harpstring. With a prolonged sigh of relief, he straightens himself up at last, and, without a word of comment or inquiry, bids the boys "walk on slowly." But the sly complacency of his face might have reassured Diedrich the Doubter; and Ormskirke asks no more questions. Albeit not specially opinionated, he is fond of trusting to his own practised eyes: these have not been idle for the last few minutes, and have quite confirmed the trainer's confidence. That he is abundantly satisfied is plain no less from his countenance than from his manner, as he selects another cigar from his case very carefully, with the air of one about to savour thoroughly a luxury well earned.

A good-natured easy-going man, as a rule, is Martin Wyatt—though, in case of stable delinquencies, somewhat ready with his ash-plant—and with a jocund word ever ready for high or low. As they pass the mushroomer, still busy, he hails her cheerily.

"Had good luck, my lass? They ought to sprout rarely after last night's rain."

The girl comes forward with a slow halting gait; and, dropping an awkward curtsey, holds out her basket for inspection silently.

With these dark sallow complexions it is always guess-work; but you might set her age somewhere far on in the teens. The curves of her figure are quite lost in the coarse, ill-fitting dress, slatternly put on besides; even a winsome face would be marred by the black elf-locks, straggling from under a tattered bonnet, which, whilst she stooped, has

fallen forward over her brow; and there is a vacant, uncertain look in her large tawny eyes.

"A poor lameter, my lord," Wyatt explains in a considerate whisper; "and hardly 'half saved,' I reckon. It's a long drag for her up here; for she bides somewhere down Fulmerstone way; but we've seen her about, most mornings, of late, though, often as not, she carries back an empty basket. She's done well to-day, though. Why, Polly, you must have a fair eighteen penn'orth there. Shall I give you two shillings, and take the lot?"

The girl shakes her head, not sullenly but dissentingly, neither smiling nor frowning; and glances from one face to the other in a pitiful, helpless way, like one who has fallen into an ambush unawares.

Though he has not thrice in his life subscribed to a public charity, Lord Ormskirke is negligently liberal of casual alms; and, just now, he happens to be in special good humour with his kind. He breaks in, with a rich mellow laugh.

"You're too canny for her, Martin; and I'm too hungry to bargain. I'll deal with you, Polly, and throw a luck-penny in." He holds out a new bright sovereign.

For one instant, the wandering eyes flash with surprise or pleasure—surely not in mirth? Then they grow vague again, as she tenders her basket eagerly, muttering, betwixt profuse curtseys, incoherent thanks. The change of countenance, though momentary, is very complete; and it does not altogether escape Ormskirke, who also observes that the hand and wrist, though deeply tanned, and not specially slender, are rather shapely. He notes these things in a careless, mechanical way; for he never can be five minutes in presence of a woman or a horse without taking stock of their points—not necessarily coveting, or likely to covet, either. Mayhap he will peruse this face more curiously, before all is said and done.

"You spoil the market, my lord," grumbles old Martin—with a merry twinkle in his eye, though. "Never mind, Polly; it's only for once in a way, and you want a new bonnet badly. You'll pick up your basket when you pass to-morrow."

The girl curtseys again, with that same dumb humility;

and stands stock still, watching the others till they were nearly out of sight. Then she limps away, pausing now and then, as though to take breath, and soon disappears in one of the deep shady lanes common in that country. So Baron Down is left nearly to itself for awhile. Yet not quite to itself; for not many minutes pass before an elderly man, clad in a shepherd's frock and leathern gaiters, worms himself serpentwise out of the very centre of the furze-patch nearest to the clump. After peering round long and warily, he saunters away, not quickening his pace till he is well under cover of the brake.

An hour later, from a lonely farmstead, almost hidden in a leafy hollow at the very foot of the hills, emerges a figure, scarcely in consonance with the surroundings. The day is too young for charitable visits; and what other motive can have drawn this dainty dame hitherwards? It never entered into the heart of rural artist to conceive the *polonaise* refining every curve of the tempting figure; farmers' daughters, be their sires ever so thriving, rarely don hosen delicate of hue and texture, as those whereof we catch liberal glimpses when the looped skirt sways in the rising breeze; you might pace the Boulevards, from the Place of the Bastille to the Church of the Madeleine, without encountering head-gear more coquettish than the *toque*, set so saucily on the rich russet trusses; and the fair fresh cheeks are free from freckle or tan. No wonder yonder ploughman—howbeit they meet, perhaps, not for the first time—halts midway in his tuneless whistle, and gapes after her admiringly, as she swings down the field-path with even, elastic gait; lilting a ditty, which, luckily for Giles's morals, is in a foreign tongue. Yet that same *chansonnette* is not fuller of mischief than the eyes, just now gleaming triumphantly—the eyes of tawny brown,





CHAPTER II.

THE LOCKSLEYS.



VERY quiet watering-place, even now-a-days, is Fulmerstone—so quiet that some do not scruple to call it dull as death. In those times it was little more than a fishing hamlet, boasting one or two rows of modest lodgings, a few detached villas, and one Manor House of great antiquity. This last stood nearly in the centre of a small demesne, girdled by a thick belt of hardy evergreens, and fenced by an ashlar wall, exceeding high and strong; so that from without the tops of the twisted chimneys could scarcely be discerned. During ten months of the year the mansion was untenanted; but, for six weeks in each autumn, it was invariably honoured by the presence of its master.

This was no other than the puissant Marquis of Montsorel, whose fame—or infamy, if you will—had been noised abroad in most civilised cities. Besides an ample retinue, some half-dozen *artistes* of both sexes—a fanaticism for music was perhaps his single innocent taste—usually accompanied him; but no guest, either from far or near, ever came to break the completeness of his solitude. In very deed, howsoever he might offend elsewhere, here the Marquis did live cleanly, and his banquets in no way resembled the supper of Trimalchion. Each visit was to him a kind of *retraite*; only it was his body, not his soul,

that he was "making." But the natives and sojourners of Fulmerstone utterly declined to accept this view of the case, and persisted in regarding the Manor House as a *Parc aux Cerfs*, stained by all imaginable iniquities. They were decent homely folk, as a rule, with scant sympathy for sin; but certainly they spoke of these matters with a mournful pride, and would have been very wroth with any sceptic who would have doubted or palliated the wicked noble's misdemeanours. Each afternoon, when he went forth to take the air, without the great open gates gathered groups and knots of idlers, waiting patiently to catch a glimpse of the sallow, saturnine face; though some there must have known every line of it by heart; and when through the stilly night strains of music, or snatches of song, floated out from these unhallowed precincts, the passers-by would halt and listen with a fearful fascination; like belated travellers, who, emerging from the mountain gorges, hear the wolves howling.

Besides this potentate, sundry other notables frequented Fulmerstone in the bathing season—county folk, for the most part; though more than one of the villas aforesaid was owned by a banker, lawyer, or prosperous burgher from the cathedral city, some score of miles away. And the lodging-houses were generally well filled with visitors of more modest means, who could not afford to pay too dearly for health, let alone relaxation! for in those days Fulmerstone dealt mercifully with the stranger. So, for three or four months, the place was fairly busy, if not gay. During the rest of the year nothing could be more evenly monotonous, and the lightest pebble sufficed to spread wide circles in the social pool. A traveller, uncommercial or unaccredited, arriving at this abnormal time was looked upon with wonder, verging on mistrust; and, without meaning to be inhospitable, the native mind was prone to query,—like the Siddons—"How gat he here?"

One afternoon, early in the spring, a buzz of excitement permeated the main street; and more than one shopman—trade was exceeding slack—came to his door to watch the station fly pass. That it passed slowly was no wonder; for it was laded with luggage to the peril of its ancient springs, and the distress of the ancients animal betwixt the shafts.

However, by dint of much whipcord and strong language, the slight ascent leading to the principal hostelry was conquered; and the driver, flinging himself from his box, jerked the fly-door open before any of the inn-folk appeared, with the air of one who has had more than enough of the job in hand, and would fain get quit of his customers.

"If I'd a-guessed at the weight of them foreigneering trunks," he muttered, half in soliloquy, "I wouldn't have been caught so easy. I was a fule not to heft 'em. I've a'most killed the old oss, and got barely the fare."

Some one in the carriage laughed defiantly; and a girl sprang out lightly, without waiting for the steps to be let down. It was she who had driven the bargain. As she stood there under the porch, shaking out her skirts, and, so to speak, "preening" herself, her lips smiled and her eyes glittered with mischievous mirth; yet, had she frowned heavily as Shylock eager for revenge, it could not have been more evident that she meant to hold by the letter of the contract. Scant hope of largesse was in that blithsome face; and even the dull Wessex boor was not dolt enough to waste more breath in argument or complaint.

Next emerged a square undersized man, hard-featured and keen-eyed. He was very quietly dressed in a dust-coloured suit, matching almost to a shade his close-trimmed hair and whiskers! nevertheless, you would have said this person had a horsey look, even before noticing the peculiar over-alls, and the scarf folded after a fashion only learned in racing or hunting stables.

The third occupant of the station fly descended slowly and painfully. He was wrapped in a long fur-lined cloak, and though the air was scarcely chill, he shivered twice or thrice as he limped up the steps, leaning on a crutch-handled stick and the other man's arm.

A goodly person once, beyond doubt: but so bowed now that it would have been difficult to guess his height when standing erect; his cheeks were sunken and drawn: and the fretful lines round the mouth, not less than his restless irritable eyes, were significant of sharp physical pain, anything but patiently borne.

We need not follow the party into their inn, especially as

they quitted it on the morrow ; but to the visitors' book that evening were added the names—

CAPTAIN and MISS LOCKSLEY.
PETER HARRADINE.

There was large choice of lodgings, of course, and the strangers soon found apartments to their mind ; but the terms were not so easily settled. Once more Miss Locksley made the bargain, and had a pretty passage of arms with the Scotch landlady. Mrs. M'Tavish had long practice and good skill with her weapons, yet she came not off wholly victorious.

"It is vera well to be canny and cautious," she said that same afternoon, talking over these things with a neighbour ; "but of all the auld heads on young shoulders!"—and shook her head ominously, signifying that, had she guessed the demoiselle to be so cunning of fence, she would not willingly have fought her.

Perhaps, in her heart, the sturdy Scotchwoman rather admired her youthful antagonist ; at any rate, she bore no outward malice, and seemed quite satisfied with her lodgers. They gave comparatively little trouble, and the bills, though sharply scrutinised, and occasionally taxed, were regularly paid. By one doubt, however, the M'Tavish was greatly exercised. When the family had been a month under her roof, she still could not determine to her satisfaction what relation Peter Harradine bore towards the Locksleys. He was ever at the father's beck and call, ready to perform such offices as invalids require from their male attendants, even to the dragging of a wheeled chair ; and the daughter often addressed him in a tone more imperious than most people used to old and trusted domestics. Yet, when off duty, he seemed an independent personage, spending his evenings in the sitting-room with the others, and in all respects comporting himself with the air of an equal. Mrs. M'Tavish could testify, at these times, that she had often heard his harsh creaking voice holding its own in argument ; and, when Captain Locksley had retired to rest, the demoiselle would sit with Peter Harradine whilst he smoked, late into the night. Now, if servitude were ever so good an "inheritance," it could hardly claim such privileges as these. Of course it

did not matter, and was no concern of hers ; but the landlady's inquisitive mind was none the less disquieted. As time passed on, however, she found fresh cause of wonderment.

Many of the M'Tavish's lodgers had been early risers, and she herself was no sluggard ; but Mr. Harradine's performances in this line fairly staggered her. No matter how unpromising the morning—so long as it was dry overhead—he was always stirring with the dawn, and, soon after, might be seen walking briskly towards the Downs. He was usually absent some three hours—sometimes till late in the forenoon. Possibly, to anyone conversant in such matters, these matinal habits would have seemed natural enough ; for the hard-bitten face, and tough wiry frame, suggested that this man must all his life long have been in some kind of training. But that Mariette Locksley, who seemingly loved her ease not less than her neighbours, should imitate such an example was surely inexplicable. Yet it was so ; and now, for a fortnight past, only twice, when the mornings were hopelessly wet, had she omitted to take a long constitutional. She invariably sallied forth under Harradine's escort, but almost invariably returned alone.

However, even Meg Dods, in the plentitude of her power, could scarce have quarrelled with a guest for being untimely afoot, so long as he required no service from the household. Besides, a good spice of discretion tempered the M'Tavish's valour. So she chewed the cud of curiosity silently and decorously ; scarcely confessing, even to herself, that she found it bitter.

You will not have read thus far without reading the riddle, and guessing that not simple love of exercise and bracing air tempted these two abroad so early—guessing, moreover, that not without a purpose was Fulmerstone in the off-season graced by their presence. But, for the better understanding of all this, it is needful to glance slightly at Arthur Locksley's past : a careful review thereof would be neither edifying nor much to our purpose.

He came of honourable lineage—this worthy—and had consistently done his utmost to dishonour it. He had been given a fair start in life, and not a few fair chances in the

earlier part of his career—for his talents were of no mean order, and his personal advantages exceptional—and he had let slip or misused every opportunity. No wonder that kinsfolk and friends, wearied out at last, caught somewhat eagerly at the excuse of his disreputable marriage, and sent adrift the incorrigible castaway. Why Arthur Locksley so hampered himself, was a puzzle to all who troubled themselves to consider the matter. Neither passion nor pity could account for it; for such love as he could feel had been quenched already by satiety, and the reputation of Middle Céleste was long past mending. Perhaps the real reason lay in that cynical desire to run counter to all proprieties, which seemed ever in conflict with the man's natural cunning. Repentance was not in Locksley's line; but he certainly regretted his matrimonial plunge, and the *ex-coryphée*, if she escaped actual maltreatment, had to endure studied neglect and words sharper than stripes. Long ago she had gone to her own place, nothing loth—consoling herself, perhaps, like the broken-down buccaneer of Kingsley's ballad—

One comfort is, one can't be worse off there.

The widower scrupled not to avow that his loss was a gain; and Mariette, though she was at the age when such bereavements are most keenly felt, did not apparently take hers deeply to heart.

Since then the pair had led an odd nomadic existence, chiefly abroad, full of more chances and changes than usually attach to this transitory life. Bitter straits they had never known; for a moderate annuity, tied up beyond the possibility of anticipation or alienation, saved Captain Locksley, in his own despite, from absolute penury.

But howsoever their fortunes might ebb or flow—and the tide often changed with startling suddenness—for the last dozen years, Peter Harradine, better known in certain circles as "Pete Armstrong," was never long absent from their company. Into the origin of the confederacy it skills not to inquire; but the unholy alliance—founded probably on some successful robbery—seemed durable and sincere. This was not so strange. The two men had outlived all

reputable friendships, and—mistrusting the rest of the world in which they lived—each had come to believe implicitly in the other thief's honour. In public, Peter Harradine was less an associate than a humble dependent, submitting to the father's insolence, and the daughter's tyranny, with stolid unconcern; but, in private, he would assert himself roundly, and, when bent on carrying his point, could be obstinate as a mule or a Breton.

There was neither mystery nor romance about Harradine's antecedents. He was bred on a Lincolnshire grazing farm, and horse-dealing, of course, was part of his father's trade; so Pete was almost cradled in the saddle, and, before he was twenty, could school a colt—and sell him, to boot—better than any breaker in the country side. His services were in great requisition at cross-country meetings; and, ere long, it was discovered that even over the flat he could hold his own with the average of professionals. Gentlemen-riders were not so plentiful then as now-a-days, neither were their qualifications very closely scanned; so for several years Harradine throve not ill in this capacity: with a few grains of honesty he might have thriven better yet. You remember the three points of the ancient Persian's education—to ride, to shoot, and to speak the truth? The first two essentials Pete Harradine had thoroughly mastered; but in the last he was lamentably deficient. There was a treacherous taint in his blood that must needs have shown itself, whatsoever had been his calling. Supposing the profit equal, he seemed actually to prefer roping to winning on the square; hence his *sobriquet* of "Pete Armstrong." There was no National Hunt Committee then to take cognisance of such offences; but before the tribunal of public opinion the man was arraigned and found guilty, and a sentence of virtual disqualification went forth.

Meeting after meeting, he found himself without a mount, watching moodily the blunders of mere tyros, till he was forced to realise that his occupation was gone. "His nerve was gone," he was wont to mutter, by way of excuse, to the few who queried why he was standing idle: it would have been nearer the mark had he answered, that the nerve of his employers had failed. Owners and backers had at last decided, that there was no trusting to the strong skilful

hands that could play such strange tricks with the leather.

Harradine accepted the position, when he found it inevitable, with stolid indifference ; making no effort to set himself straight in the world's eyes, or even promising to mend his ways. Thenceforth he had lived somewhat precariously by his wits ; eking out the scanty allowance wrung from his miserly old sire, by betting and horse-coping on a small scale, and occasionally riding at Continental race-meetings, where his ill name was not up.

A temper, naturally saturnine, had been soured by reverses ; but there was one soft spot in that *compages* of wire and whalebone. He was absolutely devoted to Mariette Locksley. Even in her childhood, he was her thrall : now, he honestly believed that this earth held no other such paragon, and, to gratify her whims, grudged neither time, trouble, nor money. Captain Locksley was by no means a doting father, and, setting no bounds to his own self-indulgence, would deny his belongings anything in reason. The girl had a passion for gay attire ; and often Pete Armstrong would smoke bad cigars for a fortnight—choice tobacco was his one luxury—and never grumble, so long as Mariette was daintily gloved and delicately shod. All this she had come to accept as a matter of course, and her due, and seemed to consider any one of his sacrifices overpaid by a light careless kiss. Nevertheless, beyond doubt, she was fond of him, after her fashion, and felt more filially towards Peter Harradine than towards her proper parent.

Captain Locksley's health had been breaking fast of late, and a sharp attack of rheumatic fever had played havoc with a constitution enfeebled by excess and vigil ; but his greed of gain was strong as ever ; and, with eyes steadfastly bent on the main chance, he had come now to Fulmerstone.

In his gilded youth, when, at rare intervals, he fluttered down from town to the paternal halls in Marlshire, Arthur Locksley was much admired by the rustics, both of high and low degree ; but by none more cordially than a certain James Gliddon, the steward's son. Flattered by this enthusiasm, and discerning, perhaps, in the other tastes similar to his own, the guardsman, in those days, much affected this

companionship, and often permitted his adherent to take a modest share in his own turf ventures. Gliddon's gratitude was absurdly disproportionate to the favours conferred ; but he never had a chance of proving it ; for, before the client came to man's estate, the patron was forced to put the narrow seas betwixt himself and his misdemeanours ; and thenceforth, the paths of the two widely diverged.

Gliddon himself was rather of a vagrant turn ; and chance after chance had slipped through his fingers before he brought up at last in safe anchorage by marrying a widow—substantial in all respects—tenant on long lease of that same snug homestead under the lee of Baron Down. Their wedding-trip was to the nearest watering-place on the French sea-board. There James Gliddon met again his ancient protector, just struggling back into life after sore sickness. As they talked together of old times and old pursuits, a vision of possible profit flitted across Locksley's restless brain. Though he had seldom of late years shown on an English racecourse, the "Calendar" was still his favourite study, and still, through the medium of Harradine, he had dealings with the Ring. If he could surprise a single important secret of the famous Ormskirke stable, it would be worth "going for the gloves" in earnest. In Gliddon, to whom, despite recent good resolves, the scheme was very congenial, he found a zealous coadjutor ; and the plan of action was soon settled.

Among the ex-guardsman's accomplishments, was no mean knowledge of chemistry : indeed, in his wanderings to and fro, he had picked up one or two recipes that would have done credit to René the Queen's Poisoner. To him the change of Mariette's complexion was mere child's play ; a black wig, and a marvellous command of feature, did the rest.

It was no wonder that Martin Wyatt's shrewd suspicious eyes failed to penetrate the disguises donned each morning by that precious pair. Harradine's was almost a needless precaution ; for he was always couched in safe ambush before the Ormskirke string came out. Cautley Farm, too, was a thoroughly safe shelter ; for James Gliddon was already thoroughly dominant in his new home, and even his buxom helpmeet guessed there would be trouble if she

neglected a warning, or pryed too deeply into a secret of her soft-spoken spouse. The farm servants—all afield at this hour—if they remarked anything, saw nothing odd in visitors, friends of their master's, coming regularly for their draught of new milk ; and none were likely to watch the disused lane, winding through high wooded banks from the back of the homestead to the verge of Baron Down.

That Captain Locksley should have chosen to prentice his daughter to the touting-trade, rather than trust only to the long experience of Pete Harradine, will not seem wonderful to such as care to look a little deeper into the development of Mariette's character.





CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND CHILD.



PLEASANT morning-room enough in sunny weather, though the out-look could never be attractive—a stretch of bare common, where the hardiest furze-plant could never thrive, and where the herbage, even at this season dusky green, bore token of biting sea-winds and drenching spray.

Here, a family-council of three was sitting; and, as often happens in such cases, anything save unanimity prevailed. Mariette's foot was beating note of war as she leant against the mantel; Peter Harradine's face was like a black flint-stone; whilst on Captain Locksley's dwelt a judicial gravity, very different from its wonted fretfulness, as he glanced from one to the other, evidently halting betwixt two opinions. It was he who broke the silence ensuing on rather a sharp passage of tongues.

"There must be no mistake here, and there ought to be none. Why, Pete, you've seen trials enough ——"

"Ah, and ridden enough," the other snarled; "but what's that to do with it? I'd better take lessons over again—lessons from that old mummy who schools the academy down yonder. Perhaps *he'll* teach me to judge a finish!"

By dint of long rolling to and fro in turbulent waters, this *λίθος ἀναλίδης*, without actually gaining polish, had lost most of its angles and sharp edges. He could be sullenly dogmatic; but very seldom did Peter Harradine lose his

temper, and few mortals were less hampered by personal vanity. Nevertheless, you may find a very outcast priding himself upon *something*; though in the eyes of his fellow-men it may be a physical or moral deformity. On his own knowledge of horseflesh, and familiarity with every trick of the turf, Pete implicitly relied, and expected his friends—such friends as these at least—to do the like. He could not forget that there was a time when paladins and peers hung on his utterances as oracular, and when high-born dames repaid a timely “tip,” with smiles sweeter than those vouchsafed to the favourite of the hour. And here was a chit of a girl, who had looked on at about a dozen Continental meetings, bearding him in his very stronghold. It was more than flesh and blood could stand; doubtless “he did right to be angry.”

Never was just indignation more utterly wasted. Had Locksley credited his comrade with any fine feelings, he would not have been careful to spare them; and Mariette evidently exulted in the success of her provocations. To this precocious philosopher the exhibition of any human weakness whatsoever was at once amusing and instructive; and to have got such a fair “rise” out of stolid old Pete, was no mean triumph. Her sense of humour overcame her irritation; and her eyes as well as her lips were laughing when she answered—

“*Va te faire pendre, imbécile!* Who wants to meddle with your prerogatives? I scarcely looked at the horses; but I had a good look at the men—I know I’m right.”

Harradine laughed in his turn—rather gratingly: but he was breaking ground before the dauntless little amazon.

“Took a good look at the men? That I’ll be sworn you did—specially at Ormskirke. Well, you’ve had practice enough in *that* line, I own. So my lord seemed in a good frame, did he?”

“In a heavenly frame; full of faith, and hope, and charity into the bargain. I shall hang his sovereign on my *chatelaine* for luck.”

And she spun the coin aloft as she spoke; catching it alternately on the back and palm of her hand with a juggler’s deftness. Captain Locksley’s eyes followed the gold piece covetously, as it flashed through a stray sunbeam.

The smallest legal tender, owned by another, had a certain fascination for him. In the article of—*alieni appetens, sui profusus*—he was a very Catiline. He felt, however, that neither to threat nor coaxing would the strong, lithe fingers resign their booty ; so, frowning discontentedly, he reverted to business.

“Time presses,” he said : “you’ll shave the mid-day train close, as it is, Pete. I shall chance it and follow Etta. If she’s wrong, she may repent in sackcloth ; for I’ll stand no more purple or fine linen.”

“And if Etta’s right,” she retorted scornfully, “her prospects will be more vague then. *N’est-ce pas, père chéri ?* I’m not much afraid, though ; if Pete is, he’d better not stand in.”

The angered look had left Harradine’s face ; and there was a kind of sadness in his keen grey eyes as they sought Mariette Locksley’s.

“That’s hardly a fair hit,” he said, quietly. “And you needn’t be vicious, Missy, now you’ve bested me. Not stand in with you ? A little late in the day to talk like that—isn’t it ? If it is a last venture this time, all the more reason for sticking to the ship. Now give me a kiss for luck, and to show there is no malice, and I’ll start at once to work the oracles.”

Their plan of action had been matured long ago ; so, with a few more words of caution and counsel from his comrade, Harradine departed.

With drooping eyelids and a sigh of weariness, Captain Locksley leaned back in his easy chair ; and his features seemed to collapse in some strange sort of way. Whatsoever he might have been in former years, he was no hypochondriac now : and the exertion of talking, listening, and pondering had overtaxed his strength. Still leaning against the mantel, his daughter watched him narrowly. Yet there was neither tenderness nor compassion in the earnest gaze ; nor, indeed, more of interest than might become a physician studying the symptoms of an intricate malady.

There was a long silence ; then Locksley spoke in a faint, hoarse whisper—

“My drops !”

With a steady practised hand, the girl measured a certain quantity out of a phial, and held it to the invalid's lips, whilst he swallowed it with an evident effort. The cordial had a rapid effect, in so far that his face lost that flaccid look ; but he went on muttering still with closed eyes :—

“What did Pete say about a last venture? He was not far from the mark, if he meant mine. The game is nearly played out—very nearly.”

And still Mariette Locksley answered never a word. Probably, the sick man, like others in the same condition, expected contradiction, if not comfort, and was chafed by the girl's silence ; for he shifted fretfully in his chair, and when he opened his eyes, their expression was somewhat malign.

“Do you ever look your future in the face, Etta—your future, after I'm gone? My annuity drops with me ; and, if this throw comes off ‘crabs,’ there won't be enough to bury me, unless I die a defaulter.”

“It is not a pleasant prospect,” she answered, coolly ; ‘but I *have* faced it often enough of late. I have no definite plans. Sometimes I think of trying my mother's profession : it would not be such hard work as governessing ; and, if I had no great stage success, there is always the chance of a brilliant marriage, you know.”

The close harness of selfishness and self-esteem was not quite proof against that last taunt ; for Locksley winced ever so slightly : but he would have borne physical pain, rather than gratify Mariette by betraying annoyance, and his tone was, to the full, as cool as her own.

“Not a bad notion : you might rise higher than she did ; your feet and figure are better, and you've far more natural *verve*. Indeed, with your talents, I think it's just possible that you might find a fool worth marrying outside the *coulisses*.”

If this family was deficient in other elements of domestic happiness, it certainly did not lack that of frank speaking. Ruffling her skirts, she swept a long low reverence, like a dancer acknowledging some costly tribute to her skill ; and sprang erect again airily.

“And suppose the fool were found?” she said.

The keen business-like look came back into Locksley's

eyes for a second or so ; then his countenance fell, and he laughed contemptuously.

"You mean that sandy-haired soldier, I presume,—Glyde—Clyde—what do you call him? Well, he looks fool enough for anything ; but how do you know he's good enough? You've no right to be ambitious ; but a subaltern in a marching regiment ——" the pause was sufficiently expressive.

"I do *not* know—yet ; but I shall know soon. His relations here are 'carriage company,' you know ; they are so vulgar that they must be rich ; and Mr. Clyde himself has several points of the *parvenu*. A linesman with prospects is a rarity, I suppose ; but not quite a monster. Now I'm going out. You won't want me for an hour or so?"

Locksley glanced up, not at his daughter, but at the clock on the mantel—his lips wearing that same evil sneer.

"It is hardly noon yet," he said. "If you make haste, you may find him sober."

"Sober enough for all practical purposes," she replied, with a confident nod ; and so went her way.

Once more the invalid's face grew white and wan, as his head drooped forward on his breast, and his eyes closed ; yet he was not sleeping ; for, every now and then his brow contracted, and around his mouth flickered sharp twitches of pain. Some of the many, to whom, in his pitiless cynicism, he had wrought wrong, might have been moved to pity Arthur Locksley, as he lay there—not far without the verge of the shadow of death—in every sense, so awfully alone.





CHAPTER IV.

THE "LOVERS."

THOUGH the holiday-folk were so far conspicuous by their absence, the summer season at Fulmerstone had fairly set in ; and the regular tenants of the villas aforesaid—in most cases represented by their families—were arriving fast.

A misty morning had broken out into a bright breezy noon ; and every creature in the place that could stir abroad was disporting or reposing itself on the stretch of beach sloping down from the outer verge of the common. The reckless architects who, all warning notwithstanding, persist in building their houses on sand, and look eagerly for the coming of the flood that shall beat thereon, were plying spade and trowel busily ; and a ceaseless ripple of childish mirth answered the mirth of the sea.

Somewhat apart, under the shadow of a fishing boat hauled up high and dry, a man lay, half supine, smoking assiduously. He seemed quite out of place in that cheerful homely picture ; indeed, to no landscape would he have added much attraction. Without being positively repulsive, his features were coarsely cast ; and a better face might have been marred by the dull complexion and weak unsteady eyes. He seemed in no pleasant frame of mind either ; for, once or twice, when the laughter rang out louder and nearer, he muttered something that sounded very unlike

a blessing, spurning the pebbles with his heel. No wonder that the small populace, in their play, gave this personage a wide berth, or that the nursemaids, though the sun was high, left him to the solitary enjoyment of his shade. He might have lain thus for an hour or more, when something seemed to rouse him from his sullen apathy. He rose to his feet and advanced a few steps quickly; then, checking himself, he began to saunter forward with a poor pretence of unconcern. The afterthought came too late; and such clumsy by-play was little likely to deceive Mariette Locksley, just then crossing the common with her face turned seaward.

She walked well, certainly—perhaps a trifle *too* well; for a severe critic might have suggested somewhat less of undulation. Yet it was worth while to watch in what springy fashion her feet—very shapely, though not remarkably small or slender—seemed to rebound from the sward. As she came nearer and nearer, Leonard Clyde's sallow cheek flushed and his dull hazy eyes awoke; nevertheless, when they stood face to face, he was frowning moodily.

"I thought you were never coming," he grumbled, without any form of salutation. "I've been waiting—and waiting—for an hour or more."

She smiled defiantly.

"*Quelle corvée!* On a morning like this to be doomed to wait—and wait—in the shade, and out of the wind, with one of the big black cigars which I detest to keep you company."

The use of foreign words and idioms was no affectation in Mariette—her mother was French, you will remember, and her girlhood had been spent almost entirely abroad; but it greatly imposed on Leonard Clyde, who, like many other illiterate people, both admired and envied such as had the gift of tongues. Her last words, however, were spoken with a purpose. From infancy upwards she had lived in a Nicotian atmosphere, and, at proper time and place, would puff cigarettes with infinite zest; but only twice or thrice, as a special favour, when they had strolled far beyond the public ken, had she permitted this, her admirer, to smoke in her presence. Very early in their acquaintance, she had discovered that the safest plan was to keep Leonard Clyde

not only in, but below, his place; and it had been proved sufficiently that his sullen temper and underbred insolence were no match for her quiet self-assertion.

He flung away the half-finished weed with a muttered apology, and walked on by her side, still frowning. Mariette's discipline was not monotonously severe; and she often rewarded her bear with a cake when he "sat up" properly.

"I could not come out earlier," she said in a milder tone. "Papa kept me; he was not nearly so well this morning. Those black cigars—you know why I hate them. They do you so much harm. Perhaps you would not smoke and drink so much, if the place were not so dull. Why did you come here for your sick leave—why do you stay here? You say that you don't like your aunt and kind cousins. Well, they are not *gentilles*, I own. Why don't you go—home?"

The last word came out after slight hesitation, and with a slight sigh, as if the sage counsel cost the speaker somewhat. Clyde was intensely gratified. He had never before drawn so much sympathy from his imperious mistress; but as, in his triumph, he waxed not only incoherent but ungrammatical, the precise words of his reply are not worth recording. It was to the effect, of course, that "*she* knew why he stayed—that it could never be dull whilst"—etc. etc.

She waited till he had talked himself out of breath, just as she would have waited for the running down of an alarum. Then she said, earnestly, as if following out her former train of thought,—

"You have never spoken to me about your home. Tell me about it now."

With all her worldly wisdom, Mariette Locksley was not yet wise enough to comprehend how crucial was that question of hers. If a man—a man, not a pedant, or an impostor, be it understood—can speak naturally on any subject, he will assuredly so speak on this one; and the good or the bad drop will come visibly to the surface. You will find people, staunch at the core but much given to harmless self-glorifying, become quite simple and truthful here; whilst the vulgar braggart will but boast himself more unseemly.

I remember an instance in point, so ludicrous that it ceased to be offensive. There was present at an Oxford supper-party many years ago a scion of the cottonocracy,—quite a character in more ways than one, with a burr almost infectious in its Doric strength. After setting forth the state-splendours of the paternal mansion, he began to describe the ordinary dinners, whereat only the family assisted.

"There we sit," quoth he, "drinking out clart; iverly mahn wi' a floonkey in livery behind his chair. And *we d——n their eyes like thoonder!*"

We killed a golden goose with our laughter that night; for the Lancastrian, wary, though not sensitive by nature, took alarm once for all, and never again spake unreservedly with his lips.

Leonard Clyde's notions of domestic grandeur were somewhat more refined. Nevertheless, his word-painting was hard and garish to a degree; and, though he waxed almost eloquent at last, it was after the fashion of an auctioneer putting an eligible property before the public. However, a *catalogue raisonnée*, no matter how practical and prosaic, was precisely what Mariette required, and the result was very satisfactory: the gold-leaf might be coarsely and clumsily laid on, but it had a sterling look—that was the main point. Neither was she much displeased to hear that the senior Clyde, maintaining his house at a fair rate, was rather careful than lavish of his purse. Discovering Leonard, his second son, to be singularly inapt for business, he allowed him to choose his profession; but insisted on his roughing it, for a time at least, in a marching regiment, on an allowance sufficient only for reasonable needs. All this sounded substantial; and Mariette had long since learnt to distinguish very justly betwixt substance and shadow.

Neither did this clearer insight into things a whit discourage her as to the event of her scheming. Endowed with a wonderful memory, she would listen for ever when there was aught worth listening to; and thus built up for herself theories which were, as a rule, tolerably correct. Though his habits of self-indulgence often blinded his better judgment, Arthur Locksley was not deficient in worldly wisdom; and the seed he had unconsciously sown—he never troubled

himself to lecture or advise—had borne fruit. Mariette had somehow come to realise where her best chances of settlement lay.

In their own world, or rather the world which ought to have been their own, these would be faint indeed. She had not forgotten with what coldness, or formal courtesy yet more galling, some, once his familiars, had evaded her father's advances by the waters of Baden or elsewhere ; and she rightly divined that recent seclusion, and comparative harmlessness, would never set Arthur Locksley straight with those who knew why he quitted the Brigade without sound of trumpet. People too indolent, or too good-natured, to rake up the evil past on the occasion of a chance-meeting, might speak out very much to the purpose, if they saw a friend or relative likely to commit himself in *that* quarter.

But in a purely commercial world it would be very different. Scandalous chronicles of ancient date are not usually filed here, and there are limits to mercantile caution. Connection, though it cannot be actually discounted, has a certain market value ; and—without a spark of family pride—looking at the question as it were *ab extra*—Mariette considered that the blood in her veins was blue enough to tinge any ordinary plebeian pool. Of late her father had not overtly offended against the social code ; and what Glaswegian would care to search out the obscure graveyard, far down in Provence, where the *ex-danseuse* had found rest ? A shrewd, prosperous trader might think it worth while to pay handsomely for the privilege of claiming kith and kin with the Locksleys of the Leasowes ; on whom, though themselves untitled, was reflected, more or less distantly, the splendour of half-a-dozen coronets. No parent, in his senses, could nourish serious views for such a foolish Cassio as he who now walked at her side ; and any sensible father should catch eagerly at an off-chance of rescuing him from utter sottishness.

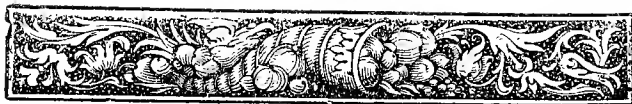
Thus Mariette reasoned within herself ; weighing each *pro* and *con* in a steady level scale. She seemed to listen earnestly to the rhapsodies of her wooer, who, on slight encouragement, had waxed garrulous and bold ; yet, all the while, they sounded in her ears “like a tale of little meaning, though the words are strong.” Concerning Leonard Clyde's qualifications for the marriage estate, moral or

physical, Miss Locksley troubled herself no more than she would have done about the form of the wardrobe in which her dresses were hung. So it served her purpose, it sufficed. In her own mind she had accepted the position provisionally—by no means irrevocably; and, when she discovered "that her father had been left too long alone," she escaped from her admirer, free as air, whilst his gyves were riveted fast.

A business-like forenoon, assuredly: only the talent developed therein would have beseeemed a dowager better than a demoiselle; and the sketch, as it stands, can hardly be attractive.

Nevertheless, for the better understanding of Mariette Locksley's story, it is needful that you should realise what manner of person she was when her twentieth summer had barely begun.





CHAPTER V.

ON THE PLATFORM.

IF all impracticable people not the least difficult to deal with are those who, having sown the wind, expect to reap substantial crops of all earth's fruits in their due season. Of this class Captain Locksley was a choice specimen. Having throughout life persistently ignored domestic duties, now that he could no longer follow his fancies abroad, and needed constant tending at home, he was inclined to insist upon their observance to the letter. Not being given to metaphors, he never openly alluded to the "serpent's tooth;" but the idea in some shape or other, was pretty constantly in his mind, and his most frequent topic of grumbling was Mariette's neglect.

Had he forgotten the manner of her bringing up—her childhood without a playmate—her girlhood without a familiar—how, for years past, she had owed each indulgence and small luxury to the broken-down black-leg, who had befriended her from the moment that he realised how completely she was an orphan? Had Arthur Locksley forgotten all this; or did he pretend in his own mind to forget it? A question not easy to answer. There are men who, even with their proper selves, must needs deal treacherously.

He was, now, very querulous, because he had failed to

extract from Mariette a *verbatim* report of her interview with Leonard Clyde. Acknowledging that the general aspect of matters was satisfactory, she had declined to enter into further particulars. Maidenly modesty had not much to do with Mariette's reserve ; she had other motives for reticence. Though she had not come yet to mistrust her sire's ability, she had begun of late seriously to mistrust his temper ; and, in conducting this purely private affair of her own, had determined to keep him in the background as much as possible. She guessed that, if they were brought much in contact, some venomous words might reach the sense even of her dull-witted wooer, and rankle dangerously ; certainly they were best kept asunder at present. So she left her father under the impression that few practical results had been attained by the morning's dalliance. Here was a fair chance for Locksley's bitter tongue ; and

All day long
The noise of battle rolled along the sea.

But the girl was already inured to this wordy warfare, and such conflicts neither chafed nor troubled her. There was not a cloud on her face, as she strolled into the Fulmerstone Station, a few minutes before the evening train was due. It was a dusty and rather disagreeable walk ; but Mariette had come hither willingly. She knew that it would please Pete Harradine hugely, to find her waiting there ; and he deserved some reward, after long journeying and hard work undertaken in his own despite. She had a certain perverted sense of equity ; and furthermore knew that by such slight concessions her captive's bands were made strong. Few people better understood the economical old proverb concerning "little gifts."

In the station were two or three groups of persons waiting with the same intent as Mariette ; and, as her roving glance rested on one of these, the fashion of her countenance changed. Vacant, triumphant, angered, seductive, mirthful, disdainful—all these expressions, within the last twelve hours, her face had worn ; but, till now, it had not been malign. Yet in that group there was little to stir malignity.

An elderly dame—comely still to look upon, though over her pleasant face occasionally stole a shade of weariness,

such as is observable in most veteran trainers of the young dies, in howsoever kindly places their lines may have fallen; a childish beauty, scarce in her teens, whose sheeny curls and mutinous mouth might have come straight from Greuze's canvas; a tall, slender girl, perhaps a year or so younger than Mariette, with eyes darker than her hair of deep velvet brown, features very small and delicate, though undeniably aquiline; and a complexion that, incessantly varying, seldom rose above the brightness of pale pink pearls.

Very many conceits, ditties, and romances have been indited concerning love at first sight, since Sophocles, in that memorable chorus, invoked Eros the Invincible. Stories quite as dramatic, and infinitely more veracious, might have been penned, I fancy, concerning hate at first sight; and the last-named instinct is, of the twain, probably less likely to err. Dr. Fell, they say, was an affable and amiable physician, and was pitched upon chiefly because his name absolutely tempted the rhyme; but the lampoon was correct enough in theory. These subtle influences occasionally act in the most unlikely quarters.

Not long ago a difference of opinion, ending in absolute rupture, ensued betwixt two of my own acquaintance. The aggressor was a placid patient person, little prone, as a rule, either to give or to take offence; and his conduct, on this occasion, seemed so at variance with his temper, that we felt constrained to question him thereon. He averred that, from the first moment of his introduction to F——, he had been possessed by one of these antipathies, from the which, despite much self-reasoning and occasional self-reproach, he never could free himself; and now—repenting of having borne himself unseemly—he rejoiced that the connection had been severed without graver quarrel.

How such a practical philosopher as Mariette could be so illogical in her aversions, cannot fully be explained; but it may be partly accounted for, in this wise.

Though she had no keen sensibilities, and though the manner of her bringing up must have gone far to deaden the patrician elements in her mixed blood, this girl, ever since she began to think and feel as a woman, had not ceased to chafe at her exclusion from the grade to which, by

name at least, she belonged. Partly from scraps of oral tradition dropped by her sire, partly from odd volumes of genealogy and county history, she had gathered materials enough to construct a tolerably complete family chronicle. How, during the last two centuries, the Locksleys of the Leasowes had warred and wedded, thriven and failed, Mariette could have expounded to her own entire satisfaction; and she would speak of these things, when she could prevail on anyone to listen, in a tone of an heiress barred from her just rights by usurpers. Though on such occasions she chose utterly to ignore her father's misdemeanours, it was not his quarrel that she espoused, and her grievances against society were purely personal. People of her temperament cannot repine without envy, or envy without malevolence. Of the class against which Mariette Locksley nourished this grudge, it would have been hard to find a better type than Sybil Coniston.

She was rarely beautiful, with a beauty still immature; but still more strikingly thorough-bred. Perfectly natural in all her gestures, and without a trace of formality—it seemed impossible that she could be awkward or hoydenish. There are some things—very few, of course—that neither Archimedes, nor Cræsus, nor the combined potency of both, can achieve. Sylviculture has not taught us yet how to force Lebanon cedars, or how to transplant them in their prime; and only from generations of pure descent are evolved the serene grace devoid of langour, the quiet self-reliance so different from self-assertion, and the carriage imperial without imperiousness.

With all her personal advantages, Mariette suffered palpably by the contrast; and she was aware of this. She knew that her attire, picturesque enough in its gay variance of colour, looked tawdry and garish near the soft grey robe, only relieved here and there with knots and flecks of blue—that her shapely foot would seem coarsely moulded beside Sybil's, arched and chiselled like that of a sheikh's daughter—that her own bright beauty, in that other presence, was but a *soubrette's* prettiness at best. So, perhaps, Mariette's aversion was not utterly irrational after all.

Before the train actually halted, it was evident whom Miss Coniston had come there to meet. Out of the window

of a first-class carriage looked forth an eager face, so strikingly like her own that the relationship must have been evident to any stranger. There were the small, well-cut features—the same deep, soft eyes—the same rich brown hair, though here sparsely streaked with grey. Neither did the resemblance stop here; for, as Piers Coniston leapt lightly down and crossed the platform rapidly, you might have noted in his motions the smooth elastic grace that lent to Sybil's most trivial gesture a certain charm. He was, indeed, a man worthy of note in more ways than one, though he need only be vaguely sketched here.

Cadet of a very ancient house—that still had great honour in its own country, though it ceased to be powerful when the Reform brooms made a clean sweep of the close boroughs—partly from interest, partly from inclination, he had chosen diplomacy as his career, and had shown no mean promise of excellence therein, when the current of his life was suddenly and permanently changed. It was the old story, of course—the old incitement which has made many sluggards diligent, many dullards learned, many paupers rich, many peasants famous; which, if it brings its followers sometimes into sorrow, seldom or never brings them to shame—the love of a fair true woman.

When Piers Coniston began to be haunted by a face and a voice, he began also to realise that the Foreign Office hardly encourages matrimony, and that, after serving yet another seven years he might still be unable to make a settlement likely to satisfy a parent less exacting than the stiff-necked earl with whom he had to deal: besides, he was not gifted with patriarchal patience. Casting about for a shorter road to happiness, he looked naturally Citywards; for a godfather of his was a man of mark on "Change," and—a chance soon after presenting itself—he cast in his lot there. Things prospered with him from the very first; not the less so, perhaps, because in his counting-house he never ceased to be courtly, and drove his closest bargains with a diplomatic air. Before two years had passed, he was able to lead the Lady Ida to a home, not unworthy of a daughter of Triermain; and, thenceforth, in the sky of their wedded life there was neither fleck nor stain till the one great storm-cloud gathered and burst. When the horror of thick darkness lifted and,

Coniston's numbed senses came back, a chair was empty by his hearth that could hardly be filled again.

And it never was filled. The man's elastic nature bore up even against this crushing blow ; and—outwardly at least—he did not refuse to be comforted, going about his work diligently, and taking his pleasures, in their season, in somewhat soberer guise. Though his smiles were much rarer than heretofore, and his keen polished wit had ceased to sparkle, women still found Mr. Coniston very attractive ; and not for want of encouragement had he forbore to mate again. But blandishment or provocation were alike wasted on his utter unconsciousness ; he was courteous—hopelessly courteous always—but the possibility of any other mortal standing in Ida's place never seemed to enter his brain ; and, though he fulfilled all his duties to society, his time of real recreation was spent at home, with no other companions than Sybil and Alice, and the staid governess who had them in charge. For some years past this had been the manner of his life ; and, though this happened to be a special busy time with him in town, since Alice had been ordered to Fulmerstone, after recovering from some childish ailment, he had not once omitted a weekly visit, extending from Friday to Monday at the least. On these occasions, had they been parted for months, the three could not have been gladder to meet again.

"I've brought you down some company, children," quoth Mr. Coniston, *inter oscular* ; and Sybil's countenance fell slightly. She was rather avaricious of her father's society, and during these flying visits did not care to share it with anyone, stranger or familiar ; but her face grew bright again when the other occupant of the carriage emerged ; and she started forward quite eagerly, saying,

"Oh, Hugh, I am so glad you have shown yourself, before I had had time to grumble. Fancy calling *you* 'company' !"

A very fair type of the well-born Anglo-Saxon was the last comer—with his long, lithe limbs, crisp, chestnut hair, broad white brow, and eyes like the deep sea. There was nothing specially imposing or intellectual in his appearance ; and even a Lydia Languish could scarce have worshipped him. Nevertheless, as he stood there, with his young un-

tainted life strong within him, no English mother need have been ashamed to call Hugh Standish her son.

"That is to be a match, of course," said Mariette Locksley to herself—still watching the group intently.

The grasp of this young person's comprehension was tolerably extensive; but amongst the things she could not comprehend, was disinterested friendship betwixt the sexes, without safe difference of age. She had not time, however, for further speculation; for, just then, Harradine's face peered over her shoulder, and Mariette became practical and business-like again, whilst she heard how—without anticipating the stable commission, or making any demonstration at the "Corner"—the cream of the long odds against the Pirate had been skimmed.





CHAPTER VI.

THE WALK HOME.

“CAN you guess why I have brought him down, Sybil?” Mr. Coniston asked, as they strolled away through the cool evening, a little in advance of the other three. Hugh and Alice were great allies, and the imperious little lady considered that, for the first few hours at least, she might claim the exclusive devotion of her special cavalier.

“No, I can’t guess,” she answered demurely. “Has the Oxford work been too much for him?”

But there was mischievous meaning in her swift reverted glance. In truth, the tan on Standish’s cheek bespoke no abuse of the midnight oil; his straight lithesome figure could never have bent long over a student’s desk; and the angles of the tennis-court were about the only ones with which his clear blue eyes were like to be familiar.

“Not the head work,” Mr. Coniston said gravely. “Luckily—or unluckily perhaps—Hugh is such a favourite that even the dons don’t actually abuse him; but his tutor writes plaintively. He was not lucky in the last examination; the papers did not suit him, it seems.”

This was a pleasant way of putting, what in rude University speech would have been termed, an easy “plough in Smalls.” In fact, the papers must have been

very curious that would have suited this Taggard disciple, and the luck exceptional that would have pulled him through.

Now it so chanced that Sybil, during a flying visit to Oxford a few months back, had, from the gallery of the Schools, assisted at the vivisection of a peculiarly helpless candidate, floundering through his *viva voce*: this dolorous spectacle of human suffering and abasement had impressed itself deeply on her mind; and she remembered the place as a kind of torture-chamber, where innocence was stretched on a moral rack for the delectation of unholy inquisitors.

"What a shame to give him such hard questions!" she said indignantly. "If they had been fair ones, of course he would have answered them."

Her father shook his head.

"Not quite of course, I am afraid. Indeed, Hugh is rather penitent about it, and actually proposed, instead of staying in town, to read somewhere steadily, for three weeks or so, before he goes to Scotland. There could not be a quieter place than this, and he will feel almost at home here. You and Alice may dispose of his afternoons; but pray do not break in on his mornings on any pretence. He is so easily—so very easily tempted. But I can always trust you, darling."

Sybil did not answer directly, however, but slackened her pace till the others came close. Then she turned upon Hugh with her brightest smile.

"Now, I call that real chivalry—leaving London in the height of the season to squire two 'lorn lasses.' It will be such a relief to Mrs. Bryant too. In papa's absence, her responsibilities are quite too much for her—are they not, dear? It is so lucky that the days have lengthened lately; for, up to two o'clock, Hugh, you know you are not to exist for Alice and me."

His sunburnt cheek flushed as though from slight vexation; but his frank blue eyes were laughing still.

"So I am put into Sybil's class already, Uncle Piers? Well—I deserve a harder task-mistress.

If we go to our places, and make no wry faces,
And say all our lessons distinctly and slow,

won't you ask for one whole holiday for me, whilst I am down here?"

He had a right musical voice of his own; and his manner was not less winning for its gay *insouciance*, yet, somehow, one needed not to be a deep student of human nature, to guess that those three words—"so easily tempted"—struck the key-note of this man's character. Stern discipline, or, better still, temperately firm training, might have corrected this defect. But of his father Hugh had only vague memories; his mother—always foolishly fond—had spoiled him worse than ever of late, since her own health began to fail; and even Miers Coniston, his guardian—"uncle," by courtesy, for no real relationship existed between them—though he had once or twice mildly admonished, had never taken him seriously to task, or thwarted his inclination. Thus far, the boy had never much abused his liberty. His fondness for outdoor sports did not prevent his tastes from being generally refined; and his talk savoured neither of the stable nor the kennel. Always natural, whether with his equals or his inferiors—he yet chose his company discreetly, eschewed strong language, and was sensitive to a fault on all points of honour. If he was self-indulgent, he was not a whit harder to others than himself; and, if he never practised self-denial, it was because his incapacity for saying No was simply boundless. Selfish he could scarcely be called in the usual sense of the word; for to serve those he loved, or even liked, he was ever lavish of his own time, trouble, or money, and had not yet come to regard any such expense in the light of a sacrifice. So there was some sterling stuff about Hugh Standish; yet not the stuff out of which a hero, or a heroic phantasm, is made.

The British brain-artificer is fain to construct his *Eidōla ex quovis ligno*—having no such rich choice of material as pertains to his compeers across the Channel. Indeed, it seems to me that these honest fellows have a lighter time of it than most who follow literature as a profession. It must be easy to be epigrammatic, when the file-firing is carried on chiefly with monosyllabic cartridges; and indolence itself might be satisfied with the margin of paper allowed to type liberally large. Add to these advantages exemption

from all trammels of probability, and you will not be far from turning a labour into a luxury. I am not thinking now of those unholy psychological or physiological studies which are perpetually bearding the Censor, but of the class fairly represented by the Vicomte Ponson du Terrail. Perusing one of these strange productions, you will probably be less impressed by the interest of the tale, or variety of incident, than by the author's wonderful self-reliance and simple faith in his public.

Take, for example, *Les Coulistes du Monde*. The chief personage here, a sailor by accident, a Breton by necessity—for, taking the largest license in other respects, unless the drama be purely Parisian, the Armorican circle hems in these romancers—after many hairbreadth escapes, is penned at last by the hunters of his heritage, and, and after an Homeric combat, sinks with a cracked skull into the depths of the Biscayan Bay. And thus, one would think, ends this eventful history. Not so. *Merses profundo, pulchrior evenit*: after a decent interval, the drowned reappears in the guise of a superb Rajah—a kind of cross between Crichton and Kehama, blending the social talents of the one with the lethal potency of the other—and works out a carefully graduated system of retribution.

Le Prince pendant son séjour dans l'Inde avait appris la langue des Dieux; et s'en servait pour les usages vulgaires de la vie.

Is not that something like a linguist? And everything, except the dialogue, is conducted on the same magnificent scale. For a marked difference exists betwixt these works and the many "Mysteries," French and English, for which Sue has to answer. In the latter the aristocratic conversations are decidedly the grossest of all the improbabilities set forth, whilst Du Terrail's *gandins*, *cocottes*, and *grandes dames* though they act in a supernatural fashion, talk among themselves quite naturally and unaffectedly. Indeed, our Vicomte, howsoever fantastic, is never positively plebeian.

From yonder miracle of nature to such a very ordinary mortal as poor Hugh Standish is a fall indeed. Yet, as none other of our puppets is likely to be invested with more

heroic attributes, this one must, perforce, wear the *colthernus* with the best grace he may.

Hugh was facile in his attachments as in his other impulses ; but his attachment for the Coniston family was no trivial chance liking, but a feeling which had grown with his growth and strengthened with his strength. Indeed, though he petted his own mother, and indulged her many fancies, he unquestionably felt more at home under his guardian's roof than elsewhere. In these free-thinking days many sons, it is to be feared, are less dutefully disposed towards their "governor" than was Hugh towards "Uncle Piers."

His feelings towards Sibyl had, of late, grown not easy to define. There was a germ of truth in those words of his, set down above. You must have noticed in what marvellous fashion damsels young and fair—this last qualification is essential—will queen it over youths some two or three years their seniors. Sybyl was less didactic and dictatorial than the average of her sex ; but Hugh had "been in her class" more than once already ; and though he might chafe, or pretend to chafe, sometimes the tuition was certainly not disagreeable.

Whether all of us wish our school days to return may be a question ; but if a certain gentle discipline, that we wot of, were threatened over again,

I bid you declare
All good fellows whose beards are grey,

would not the proudest of us take it patiently ?

Coniston smiled on his ward—rather sadly, as was his wont of late years.

"When I talked of your coming here, I made no conditions, Hugh. Reading was your own proposal, remember ; and if you choose to be quite idle, you will be just as welcome. Only I do not want the girls to make you so—*bon gré mal gré*. An hour or so's work in the morning might make the afternoons pass quicker. But I can only advise. I don't know that I have ever done much more."

"Need you have done much more?" the other asked, softly.

As they walked on together the veriest stranger to the three might have read the answer to that question in the brightening of Coniston's face.





CHAPTER VII.

LA FIANCÉE.

CN a chair, drawn up so close to the window of their common sitting-room that his head rested against the low sill, sat Pete Harradine. He was smoking furiously, as was his wont when the current of his thoughts was troubled: around Miss Lockley's head, as she leaned out over his shoulder, the thick blue wreaths curled and hung; and the nostrils, sometimes offended by much milder tobacco, seemed to inhale the same not ungratefully. Said Pete after a pause—following out his own ruminations rather than answering any objection—

“No, I don't like the Captain's looks a bit”—he seldom or never spoke of Mariette's “father”—“and I like his ways still less. I never knew a commission better worked than ours was yesterday. We got on at a better price than the stable, if the tissue from the Corner was correct; and the average was five points higher than he had reckoned on. Well, whilst I was telling him—you were upstairs, you know—if his mind followed me his eyes did not; for they were straying far out to sea. Did anything happen whilst I was away? He seemed changed somehow even in those few hours.”

“Nothing that I know of,” Mariette answered. And in so answering she probably meant to speak the truth; for

altercations, and interchange of sarcasms, were the merest "nothings" in that strange life of theirs.

Denser and quicker the smoke wreaths rolled upwards; and, even in the daylight, the broad butt of the cigar burned redly.

"I wish I knew what's best to be done," he grumbled. "The doctors here are rank duffers, I'm certain. But, if we get a cleverer one, perhaps it would only startle him, if his heart's wrong. He ain't been the best of fathers to you—the poor Captain—but he's been a sight better than none. And you'll find that out before long, I'm fearing."

"I thought I might always reckon on *you*," she said. And, despite of self-reliance and philosophy, her voice seemed to shake ever so little. The cigar was scarce half smoked out; but Harradine flung it away, as he rose and faced inwards, laying his two hands on the girl's shoulder.

"You're about right there, Missy," he said. "But, if you went about with Pete Armstrong for a guardian, the world would stare, I doubt. Before it comes to that, I'd like to see you with a home of your own; ay—if your husband wouldn't let me set foot in it."

Curving her neck quickly, but not ungracefully, like a bird pecking at food, she just brushed lightly with her lips the hand resting on her shoulder; and then with a low laugh, as if scorning her own impulsiveness, tossed back her saucy head.

"The house that would not hold us both would hardly hold me, I fancy. Well, I believe I *have* found a home, such as it is. You can guess where?"

"A couple of barrack rooms, shared with a sot like Clyde, are poor quarters for your father's daughter."

"Good enough, perhaps, though for my mother's daughter," she retorted with unusual bitterness. "But we needn't discuss that. It's no question of barrack rooms. Leonard has a fair allowance as it is, and, if he married to please his people, it would be doubled, at least, he says. And why shouldn't they be pleased? The aunt and cousins are civil to us, in their cast-iron way, whenever we meet; and Clyde *père* has had their report, depend upon it. I should not be dear at any reasonable price; for I could cure Leonard of drinking—if I tried."

Harradine looked hard at the speaker, and not altogether admiringly. His perceptions of good and evil—never very keen or delicate—had been blunted by the life he led; and both by precept and example he had, no doubt, helped to initiate Mariette into “sharp practice.” Nevertheless, some of her sentiments did occasionally cause even him to wince a little.

“If you tried!” he repeated. “Then it mightn’t be convenient to keep him *too* sober? That is looking ahead with a vengeance. Well, you must run this off your own way, and it’s lucky you don’t want much steering; for you’ve got out of our hands, that’s certain.”

She smiled at him saucily, but made no reply. And then they parted; Mariette having on hand a financial skirmish with the landlady, and Harradine an appointment at the billiard-rooms, where certain roisterers were wont to consort, even thus early in the forenoon.

Miss Locksley indulged her suitor with a longer stroll than usual that evening. Indeed, they walked so far that the turning point of one or both their lives was reached; for when they set their faces homewards, the pair were duly affianced. Clyde was incapable of rapture, or even of expressing gratitude gracefully; but he exulted hugely in his sullen way, and was indeed inclined to more demonstrativeness than suited Mariette’s purpose or taste. *Voies de fait* she did to a certain extent check; but the harsh strident voice she could neither modulate nor moderate. It seemed as though he wished to call every passer-by to witness of his triumph.

The road, however, was sufficiently solitary; and they encountered no one likely to take note of these amatory eccentricities, till Fulmerstone was nearly in sight. Then, turning a sharp corner, they came face to face with a mounted party of three—Mr. Coniston, his daughter, and Hugh Standish. Unluckily, a few seconds before, Mr. Clyde had contrived to capture a reluctant hand; and, on the strength of this encouragement, had waxed still more fervent of speech.

Mariette plucked her fingers away promptly; but the situation could not be unmade, and she knew it. She knew it, even before she saw Standish lean over to whisper a word

or two to Sibyl, riding on his left. If the girl had laughed outright, it is possible—barely possible—that Mariette might have forgiven her. But she did not laugh, and her smile—neither scornful nor sarcastic, but simply indifferent—might have been elicited by the antics of a couple of street Arabs. Piers Coniston, courteously considerate, kept his countenance to admiration, scarcely glancing at the couple on foot as he rode past; but not the less, you may be sure, was he inscribed with the others on Mariette's black tablet. Few kindly plants had ever taken root in this unlucky soil, and these few must needs have withered from mere lack of tending; but certain ill weeds had thriven rankly and apace. The crabbed Lexicographer need have wished to look on no stauncher "hater."

Clyde, too, was vaguely aware of being in a false position; but—imputing no fault to himself—he scowled on the riders as if they had intruded unwarrantably on his private domains; and, when they were out of earshot, gave vent to his displeasure audibly.

"I can't endure that Coniston lot. What right have they to swagger as they do? The father's only a City man; and if he was a duke, they couldn't hold their heads higher."

Perhaps Mariette was not displeased at hearing her sentiments echoed so promptly; nevertheless, the tone, or the turn, of that last speech chafed her.

"You have peculiar ideas of 'swagger' certainly. It's the last expression I should have chosen to describe the Coniston manner. People whose names are in Domesday Book (I will tell you what that means some day) may carry their heads much as they please; and blood keeps its colour even in the City—when it has any to lose. There—you needn't look sulky; there's nothing to wrangle about. I dislike them, too, though I couldn't tell you why. They're never likely to do us much harm."

One little word in that speech struck so dulcetly on the hearer's ears, that it took away the sting of the rest. It had come to "us" already. So the martial bird smoothed his ruffled plumes, and was soon crowing more hilariously, if not harmoniously, than ever.

But, to one of the twain, the way homeward seemed to have lengthened strangely since they traversed it last; and,

though Mariette's feet had seldom moved more nimbly, they seemed to her to drag over the last half mile as if shod with lead.

With that same strange serenity, rather akin to indifference than calmness, which had so puzzled and perplexed Pete Harradine, Captain Locksley received the news of his daughter's engagement. He embraced her, certainly; but it was rather with the air of a polite person desirous of conforming to all points of a ceremonial, than of one yielding to a natural impulse. It is probable that Mariette, instead of congratulations, had looked to receive some of the bitter arrows, of which the paternal quiver was full, and was prepared to parry them; but she was disappointed here. By the caress above mentioned, Captain Locksley formally sanctioned the engagement; and, having further signified his readiness to give audience to his future son-in-law on the morrow, he seemed to shelve the whole matter in his own mind for the present. During the rest of the evening, when he spoke—which was but seldom—it was always on indifferent subjects.

Neither could Pete Harradine be brought to express anything, beyond a faint and negative approval of the Clyde alliance.

"It *may* be a good thing," he observed; "but it is hard to handicap cocktails. You will find none of that lot in the Stud Book."

And on this point—expressing himself not always thus parabolically—he stood fast.

Considering the business-like spirit which Mariette always had brought to bear on this matter, it was odd that the state of things at home should have so chafed her. Sympathy assuredly she did not crave for; but she would have liked to meet with some encouragement; and, when this was lacking, she felt aggrieved, like a clever actor who—playing his best with no special interest in his part—is rewarded by less than his due of applause. The anomaly, however, is not so rare: rely upon it, the head, not less than the heart, has its small vanities.

Although in Captain Locksley's bodily health there was no change for the better, on the morrow, in his interview with Clyde, he was more than equal to the occasion; dis-

playing all the smooth shrewdness and polished pertinacity for which, in the midst of his recklessness, he had ever been notable. He handled all necessary topics with gloves of velvet ; but, wheresoever his finger was pressed, it left the dint of steel. Leonard Clyde was not wholly besotted either by love or drink ; he had strong commercial instincts, and singularly little delicacy in driving a bargain of whatsoever nature. But all his self-conceit could not blind him to the fact that he was pitted against overwhelming odds here ; and he was glad to escape, by shifting all further responsibility from his own shoulders to those of his "people at home."

Mr. Clyde, senior, communicated with in due course, replied very promptly—so promptly, indeed, that he seemed to have been prepared for the announcement. He was evidently fully aware of his son's proclivities, and not averse to try the cure matrimonial. Also he showed himself well up in his "Landed Gentry ;" and did not undervalue the privilege of counting kinship with the Locksleys of the Leasowes. Thus far, Mariette's previsions concerning him were correct ; but she was wrong in supposing that, to secure these advantages, he would largely loosen his purse-strings. He was civil, certainly, but in a cautious commercial fashion ; and meted out his concessions like dry stuffs—giving fair measure, but no more. He agreed to increase Leonard's allowance ; but would make only very meagre settlements, and these exclusively for the benefit of children or widow ; averring plainly that his son was not, at present, fit to be trusted with fixed or absolute independence.

This was not exactly satisfactory ; but amongst the astute speculators who, "when they can't bring off a fight, will always bring off a wrangle," Arthur Locksley was not numbered ; and, during his racing career, rarely had made an objection which could not be sustained. Having himself neither the will nor the power to make any settlement worth the cost of transcribing on parchment, he could only take up a strong negative position : he did this with much grace and some dignity. Only one thing he insisted on almost more earnestly than was decorous—that whatsoever was done should be done speedily.

Beyond a doubt, the *fiancée* herself was at first inclined to murmur ; yet she did not express any open or violent discontent. If she had not shown more affection towards her father of late, she had at least grown more deferential : indeed, sometimes she seemed almost to fear him. In the old times, she had never quailed under the lash of his bitter tongue ; but now, despite her cynicism, natural and acquired, a kind of awe would creep over her as she watched him sitting silently, with a face that might have been carved out of white marble, and with that distant look, which Harradine had noticed, in his eyes.

So the matrimonial negotiations went on swiftly and smoothly, till it was agreed that, within some six weeks, Mariette should be “ wooed, an’ married, an’ a’.”





CHAPTER VIII.

"TWO YOUNG GULLS."

THE tiniest of bays—scarcely more than a sea-nook—deep in proportion to its breadth ; fenced in by low steep cliffs curving inwards at the points of the arc ; floored with silvery-white sand, glittering with mica and microscopic shells, over which peered, here and there, grey boulders, varying in size, but all smoothed alike by the eternal waves. Quite a study for a coast-painter, and nowise marred because a single figure in the background, looking landward, saved it from utter solitude—the figure of a sleeping girl.

If the grace of motion be rare in womanhood, surely rarer is the grace of repose. Yet, had Sybil Coniston been sitting for her picture, she could scarce have looked to more advantage than she did then, nestled, half reclining, in a rocky hollow—sun-dried long ago, though it lay now in shadow ; her head bent slightly forward, yet not so bent, but that, standing over against her, you might have watched the dream-smile flickering round her mouth, and the pencilling of the long dark lashes resting on a cheek flushed slightly beyond its wont, yet delicately transparent.

She had walked out alone—for Mr. Coniston was in town, and Hugh Standish never left his own lodgings before noon—and had not meant to ramble far. But the sands were unusually firm and extensive, and the shell-hunting excep-

tionally good that morning. So she wandered on and on, till Fulmerstone was quite out of sight, and on still, till her pliant feet began to weary ever so little. She thought she would rest a little in the shadow of the cliff, where Hugh, if he followed, would be sure to find her: under escort, the way home might not seem so long. Would he follow? That question brought other questions in its train; and no wonder Sybil was smiling to herself rather consciously, when the caress of the breeze, and the whisper of the water, beguiled her into dream-land. Though the slumber was light, it lasted long; and, before it was broken, there had come a change over both sea and sky; broken banks of murky cloud lined the horizon; the whisper of the waves became a hiss; and the wind, no longer steady, but shifting fitfully, began to moan.

Sybil shivered when she awoke at last. There was cause enough for this in the chilliness of the darkened atmosphere; but you could scarce have blamed her had she shivered from fear; and, in truth, when she realised her situation, there did break from her lips a low startled cry.

Against the two horns of the little bay the surge was heaving sullenly, and, far inside these, the rocks on either hand were awash. Indeed, the tide had made such swift invasion that, when Sybil started to her feet, scarce a fathom's breadth of dry sand divided her from the creamy salvage of foam. She glanced up at the cliffs overhead only for a second; for there was scant encouragement here. They were very low at the inmost bend of the crescent—perhaps not more than some six yards from foot to verge—but so cruelly steep and smooth that to climb them, unassisted, might have baffled the starkest cragsman of the Oracles.

There was nothing Amazonian about sweet Sybil Coniston; but, under the like circumstances, Charlotte de la Tremouille, Jane Montfort, or Black Agnes herself, would probably have acted in like fashion, and cried aloud for help. Raising, without straining, her voice twice, Sybil made this essay, and no answer came; and still the tide came on swift and implacable, as is its wont when it has nearly clutched a victim. Saddle-fast in a stout ship, it is good sport to flatter the mane of the huge *destrier* Oceanus;

but, to a rider cast down and lying at his mercy, he will be feller than the mares of Diomed. I can conceive sailors loving their profession, with its infinite variety of chance and change ; but I can hardly conceive the enthusiast, who, after long experience of its humours, loves or trusts the Sea.

Though she kept her presence of mind wonderfully, Sybil's heart was fluttering like a trapped bird's, when, for the third time, she lifted up her voice ; almost before the sound had died away, it was answered by a halloo from no great distance ; and, directly afterwards, two faces peered over the cliff's verge.

Frightened as she was, Sybil recognised them instantly. Each had indeed become familiar to her by chance meetings, though she had never bestowed on them any special notice before that encounter in the Down Lane, when despite herself, Hugh's whisper had made her smile. In this her sore strait, she was bound to be grateful for any rescue ; nevertheless, it is certain she would have been more grateful had it come in any other guise. Perhaps this vague repugnance enabled her to speak so calmly.

"I am quite helpless down here, you see, and I fear you cannot help me ; but you might bring help from the nearest farm. Pray, pray, make haste."

Self-preservation was not only the first, but nearly the sole, law of Leonard Clyde's nature ; and one glance over the edge of the cliff was enough to banish any idea of attempting a descent. However, not being wholly devoid of humanity, he was about to hasten inland in search of succour, when his arm was detained.

"Don't alarm yourself, Miss Coniston," Mariette said smoothly, "and keep quite still ; there's no real danger, I'm sure. There's a farm-house in sight, and Mr. Clyde can fetch men and ropes in a very few minutes. I'll sit here meanwhile."

But while she spoke her fingers closed round Leonard's sleeve ; and, scarcely waiting for Sybil's murmured thanks, she drew back and whispered,—

"You're in a great hurry to spoil sport. There will be great sport here presently ; I wouldn't miss it on any account."

Clyde looked at her with the half-sulky, half-puzzled

expression habitual to him, when he "couldn't make out if people were chaffing."

"Do you want to see her drowned?"

"Drowned!" Mariette retorted, with a scornful laugh; "what nonsense you talk. It's my favourite sketching-place; and I know, at high-water, the foot of the cliffs is hardly covered. But the Princess Peronelle doesn't know it; and in less than ten minutes, she'll be frightened out of her wits, and forget all her airs and graces. Then you can go for more help, and still take credit for the rescue."

Miss Locksley, to give her her due, thought she was speaking truth here; and though her mischievous intents were somewhat malign, they were not murderous. But she had reckoned without a spring-tide, with a freshening south-wester at its back; and, from where she stood, she could not see that the last flood had left on the rocks beneath a damp green line, high as a tall man's shoulder.

Though there was not a spark of chivalry in Leonard Clyde's composition, and though he was prone to take delight in small cruelties, and though he bore a grudge to "that Coniston lot," he did hesitate before this *laches*. But Mariette's clasp was on his wrist, and Mariette's eyes, half coaxing, half imperious, were looking into his own. So he stood still, grumbling and growling under his breath. But that he was thoroughly ashamed of himself was plain; and as he slunk back behind a whin-bush to watch what was going on below, Ancient Pistol would have looked heroic by comparison.

Sybil could not catch a syllable of the brief conversation above; but the light laugh smote on her ear unpleasantly. Was it possible that these two were making a mock at her distress? The very doubt sent a quick hot flush across her cheek, that had begun to whiten, and, for a second or two, she felt as if she would rather dispense with such aid; but the situation was complicating itself. She stood erect now upon the low broad rock on which she had been reclining, which jutted out from the main cliff, and this poor vantage-ground would not long avail her; for already one wavelet, bolder than its fellows, had ventured to salute, not over-reverently, her delicate feet. So, on the whole, it was some comfort to her to see Mariette reappear above.

Yet not much comfort. Look up as anxiously as she would, Sybil could detect little sympathy in the tawny eyes that were beginning to gleam cruelly, or in the mouth that now hardly dissembled its mockery, or in the voice tremulous with scarce-suppressed mirth.

"I am afraid, Miss Coniston, you must get wet, after all."

Sybil did not realise, to its full extent, the treachery above; but what she did realise sufficed to rouse to the utmost the pride, of which she had her full share. I do not say that she would have died, sooner than have again entreated those above "to make haste;" but assuredly it must have been an agony that would have driven her to address to them any fresh petition. She was wet to the knees now; but her heart had ceased to flutter so painfully and the light was steady in her beautiful brown eyes, when propping herself against the cliff at her shoulder, she faced the sea,—even as her ancestors may have faced the foe, when, with heavy odds against them, they "bare up the battle."

To have been perfectly consistent, thenceforth she ought to have stood mute. But our Sybil was no stage heroine; nor even such an one as the stubborn Covenantress, who died for her faith in the Solway Firth. Though she was loth, any more,

To ask for grace
From a graceless face,

she was ready enough to crave it at any friendly hand. And there was one hand—so, strong, so ready, so trusty—if it were only near. Twice she drew a long deep breath; and twice, shrilly prolonged, the breeze carried upward and inland the single syllable—"Hugh."

As the first cry was borne past her, Mariette Locksley laughed—not boisterously, but after a low, satisfied fashion, peculiar to some women when they savour a small social triumph; nevertheless, before the second had ceased to echo, her countenance had changed. The sea was still too calm to break, even on the rocks that were awash; but, ever and anon, came a slow, sullen surge; and just then, one of these, burying her for a second almost waist-deep,

made Sybil stagger, despite the support of her right arm thrust into a cleft of stone.

Now, as was afore said, Mariette had meant only to carry out a malicious jest, and she had not meant to carry it so far. Coming along the cliffs she had not watched the state of the tide, and had reckoned that the flood would be just then slackening to its turn. A like compunction seemed to affect her companion too ! for he had left his ambush, and stood close to her shoulder. She was opening her mouth to bid him seek help instantly, when, on, the firm short turf behind them, there was a beat of hurrying feet, and Hugh Standish came up at speed.

His appearance, however opportune, is easily enough explained. He had followed Sybil along the sands at first ; but, when the tide had so risen as to make passage round certain points difficult, if not impracticable, he naturally thought that she had ascended by one of the cliff-paths, which are not unfrequent, and so turned inland too. As the swell of the down lay betwixt them, he had not heard her first cry for help ; but the last smote upon his ear with a terrible distinctness. He would have recognised the voice instantly, even had he not recognised his own name. For several seconds past, he had been wondering what those two figures on the cliff verge could be watching so intently ; and, even as he sped forward at strain of speed, he wondered. For a man contemplating with folded arms any human creature in sore distress, if not in sore peril—was a phenomenon utterly beyond Hugh's comprehension. So it would have been, if a gaunt fishwife had been then in sweet Sybil Coniston's place.

Nevertheless, though he was not specially quick of wit, once on the spot, he took in every point of the situation at a glance. Indeed, Clyde's sheepish, detected look told half, if not all, the story. Hugh's kind, handsome face—flushed already by excitement rather than by exertion—darkened with passion ; and his clear eyes darkened too.

"*That's* what you were looking at, then, you 'cowardly dog'?" he said. And as he sprang past the other, he smote him on the mouth, carelessly and contemptuously, with the back of his hand.

Whether Clyde would have taken the correction tamely,

or tried to repay it in kind, cannot be known ! for, staggering back rather from the shock of surprise than from the force of the blow, he caught his heel in a whin-root, and fell supine. Before he had struggled to his feet, Standish was over the edge of the cliff.

Yet Hugh had not flung himself down with blind inconsiderate haste. His late violence, however inexcusable, had been useful as a safety-valve ; and he was cool enough to remember that a sprained wrist or ankle might make him powerless to help Sybil, as the craven on whom he had just put shame. The Oxford gymnasiarch boasted many pupils more athletic, but few more agile, than Hugh Standish ; and his training stood him in good stead here. The face of the cliff, a fathom or so below the verge, sloped outwards ever so slightly ; and clinging, cat-like, to certain asperities that could scarce be called projections, Hugh clambered down till, as he swung at the very last hand hold, scarce ten feet divided him from the rising water. Glancing over his shoulder, he paused a second till the in-coming wave was at its deepest, and let himself drop boldly. Active as he was, if he had lighted on a sunken boulder, or even a rolling pebble, he might not have escaped so easily. But, as luck would have it, the sand was smooth and firm just there ; and, though he wavered and staggered, he never quite lost his balance after touching the ground.

All this, lengthy in narration, had in action passed so quickly, that Sybil had scarce time to realise that rescue had come at last, before the rescuer whom she would have chosen before all others dropped, almost literally, at her feet.

The clouds were rolling up more murkily in the offing, and against the horns of the little bay the surge weltered more and more sullenly. Yet to Sybil the sky overhead seemed to have brightened suddenly, and the flood-tide might swell as it listed now ; there was music rather than menace in its murmur. As for Hugh—though he had already his small ambitions—he would not have bartered the present situation for the securest seat in St. Stephen's.

One thing was notable : neither of these two had thenceforth the slightest misgiving as to how the adventure would end. Whatsoever her estimate might be of him morally or

intellectually, in a crisis like the present, Sybil's confidence in Hugh was boundless ; and he—well, if he had doubted his own power to save her, he would still have believed that Heaven would be too pitiful to let a hair of her head be harmed. His first words were jesting ; and, as her hand slid into his, she was blushing and smiling.

Nevertheless, the situation, howsoever pleasant, manifestly could not be prolonged ; and Standish, as he wound his arm firmly round the slender waist that certainly did not shrink from the pressure, looked round coolly and warily.

The tide-mark was sufficient warning against remaining where they were ; and, to round either horn of the bay, it would have been necessary to swim almost straight out to sea, to avoid being dashed on the rocks by the strong indraught of the tide. But, though over against them the water seemed deeper, the face of the cliff was much more broken ; and, though it might not be possible to scale it to the summit, in more than one spot, far above high-water mark, footing might plainly be gained and kept. In ten seconds Hugh had decided on his plan of action.

"It's all right, Sybil," he said, cheerily. "Do you see that ledge in the rock just opposite ? I'm quite sure you can climb up so far, and it will hold us both comfortably till the tide goes down ; but you mustn't mind a wetting. And, look here, dear ; if we should lose our feet in going across, don't be frightened, or cling to me. I could keep your head above water for ten times that distance, if you leave my right arm free."

She smiled up at him once again, saying—

"You may trust me, Hugh."

A sore temptation assailed Standish just then. Though they had lived in such close familiarity since they were children, his lips had never touched Sybil's cheek. It was dangerously near them now ; and, under the circumstances—even as an encouragement—the caress might have been justified. But he was conscious of malignant eyes watching from above ; so he put aside the temptation with an audible sigh, and began to advance steadily, with his left arm still round Sybil's waist.

The crossing was not very sensational after all. The water deepened more rapidly than Hugh had reckoned on ;

for a dozen strokes or so they were fairly off their feet. But Sybil behaved perfectly, and a less skilful swimmer would have found her but slight cumbrance. Indeed, at the risk of her being thought unmaidenly, her biographer must confess that, within the last few minutes, Miss Coniston had begun thoroughly to enjoy the whole adventure; and she was almost sorry to find herself in perfect security on the broad ledge aforesaid, with nothing to do but wring out her drenched garments and wait for the turning of the tide.

We will leave them perched there—"just like two young gulls," as Sybil remarked afterwards—and see how it fared with the spectators on the cliff.





CHAPTER IX.

SALVE !

THE very force and course of circumstances must, ere this, have dulled the fine feelings of a nature more sensitive than Mariette Locksley's. Slightings and rebuffs could not be altogether strange to her father's daughter : more than once the cup of humiliation had just brushed her lips ; but, till now, she had never drained a deep draught thereof, and her gorge rose at its bitterness. The affront put upon her betrothed seemed to rebound against herself, and to abide like a brand. True—she did not pretend, even to herself, to love or reverence him ; but he was her property, nevertheless, and thus far, at all events, she was injured. And there is no inconsistency in this. If I remember right, one of the famousest duels of the last generation was brought about by a blow lighting by accident on a favourite hound. Besides this, Mariette was quick-witted enough to recognise how absolutely the aggressor had ignored her own presence ; nor was this the lightest indignity.

Neither was Leonard Clyde's aspect, as he struggled to his feet, reassuring or consoling. His face was distorted with rage assuredly, but with impotent rage ; and, when he glared round as if in search of his enemy, Mariette felt instinctively that the enemy, standing to the fore, would have had no worse than foul language to fear. In com mon

justice, she might have remembered that she had only herself to thank for all this contumely; and that if, in her love of malicious sport, she had not checked his first impulse, Clyde would have been back with assistance before this, and master of the position. But in her temperament there was even less of justice than of generosity. She only remembered that she was linked thenceforth to yonder craven, spluttering disjointed curses from his bruised lips; who, had her own life been in jeopardy down there below, would have stood above, wringing helpless hands or crying on others for succour; and she hated him as galley-slaves hate each other. But Mariette's feelings, howsoever strong, were invariably tempered by a proportionate strength of mind. Her composure and self-possession instantly returned; and, when she spoke, each syllable was calculated.

"Hush, Leonard! How dare you use such words before me—even if they were not so utterly wasted? He is far out of reach now; but he will be found easily enough afterwards, if—if—we want to find him. It was all my fault that you were here at all. I'm so sorry: but I never guessed how things would turn out."

Perhaps there is no better touchstone of a man's real nature, than his manner of accepting a proffered olive-branch. This was Leonard Clyde's way.

"Your fault?" he growled. "I should think it *was* yours, unless a man's always in fault when he lets a woman have her own way. Never mind—even if he's drowned down there below, I'll take it out of *someone* for this."

And still Mariette kept her temper. She had counted the cost before she clenched her bargain; though, during the last few minutes, she had been solely tempted to annul it altogether. Having once decided otherwise, an extra item or so mattered little; nor did the rebellious outbreak or coarse menace disquiet her a whit: she knew right well how, at her pleasure, to quench that crackling of the thorns. Nevertheless, if the luckless Ancient could have guessed what a score was writ up against him that afternoon, I think, rather than fulfil his engagements, he would have paid forfeit, howsoever heavy; or have fled away and hid himself till such time as his sin, in the guise of Breach of Promise, should find him out.

"Not much danger of drowning," Mariette said, shrugging her shoulders slightly, "though it's a worse scrape than I reckoned on, and I'm still curious to see how they'll get out of it."

Once more she laid her hand upon his wrist, drawing him nearer to the cliff's edge; and, as the light touch rested there, the convulsion of Clyde's face subsided into settled sullenness: very soon he was watching, not less intently than his companion, the proceedings below.

For one instant, Mariette leaned forward eagerly, drawing a deeper breath, as a *maja* might do, looking down on some perilous feat of the arena—it was when rescuer and rescued were swept fairly off their feet. But as she marked how strongly Hugh swam, and how lightly Sybil rested on his shoulder, her eyes grew cold and careless again; and she scarcely waited to see the pair safely ensconced in their coign of vantage, before she turned away, saying—

"We won't wait any longer: the play was not so amusing as I expected, and the after-piece will be duller still. There will be any quantity of hero-worship, of course; and no one but you and I will ever know how cheaply it was earned."

And, whilst she spoke thus, the thought uppermost in her heart was—this. If she had not been cheated of her birth-right, she too might have found a mate not unworthy of a Locksley of the Leasowes; ay, even such an one as Hugh Standish, instead of ——. With all her courage and philosophy, she dared not just then glance back at the hang-dog face following close at her shoulder. And, as the breeze bore a ripple of laughter across from the niche in the rock, Mariette Locksley envied Sybil Coniston with a keener envy, and hated her with more enduring hate.

Yet such sentiments none assuredly would have imputed to her, who had overheard her discourse as she and Leonard strolled slowly homeward. A divine, taking "Blessed are the peacemakers" for his text, could scarce have argued more ingeniously than did this mundane young person, whilst she impressed on her betrothed the expediency—or rather the necessity—of ignoring, so far as in them lay, their share in the day's adventure.

"The blow—if it could be called such—had been struck at the moment when Standish was beside himself at the

sight of Sybil's danger. Indeed, it might not have been meant as a blow at all, but only as a passionate thrusting aside of an obstacle in his path ; that the obstacle was in flesh and blood was a mere mischance. The words? Words go for nothing in such circumstances. She herself had forgotten them already, and so had Mr. Standish, Leonard might be sure ; at any rate, they must not—should not—be resented. In the case of any further *fracas*, she, Mariette, would take the whole blame on herself ; and, with, her father's failing health, etc."

Had she been pleading with an inveterate duellist, she could not have uttered these platitudes with more perfect gravity and earnestness. And with equal gravity Leonard Clyde listened ; staunching, rather ruefully, every now and then, the blood still trickling from a cut on his lower lip. To a student of human nature it would have been an instructive sight, to watch the man's small vanities and conceits gradually recover themselves, like rank blades of forest-grass trodden down by heavy footprints. Before they reached home, he had worked round to the conclusion that the whole affair was a chapter of disagreeable accidents, for which he himself was in no wise accountable. Finally, he consented to follow Mariette's counsels, in which a week's absence was included ; and did so ungraciously, of course.

Nevertheless, her hold over him was strengthened seven-fold. There was no fear henceforth of his looking for aid elsewhere in any strait or emergency. The very last service that a person of this stamp ever forgets, is the repairing of his shattered self-esteem.





CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE FRUIT.

Suave est, in mare magnum
Despicere, e tuto, turbantibus æquora ventis.



TRUE sentiment, though trite, and realised probably by many prosaic people before Lucretius fitted it to rhyme. And, peradventure, to ordinary minds, not cast in the grand philosophic type, the spectacle, if less moving, will not be less agreeable, because none of our fellow-creatures are fighting for their lives beneath, and because the peril from which we ourselves have lately 'scaped hath not been unto death.

At any rate, for the couple perched on yonder cliff-ledge, the situation could scarcely have been improved. Sitting there in perfect safety, it was pleasant to watch the groundswell surging in stronger and stronger; and, more than once, when a *tricumion* flung its spray even into their place of refuge, Sybil laughed outright in merry defiance. She was not ungrateful for her rescue, and quite appreciated now the danger of her late position; for, though the water at that particular spot never rose much more than breast-high, it was next to impossible that she could have kept her footing there for hard on an hour, with no better hold than a shallow cleft in the rock afforded. But on youth—fresh unseared youth—past peril leaves even lighter impress than past sorrow; and for her, as was aforesaid, peril had ceased

to exist since Hugh came to the front. Her absence was not like to cause any grave disquietude at home ; for her father would not return from town till the morrow, and the good governess—*chaperon* by courtesy—held herself clear of responsibility when either of her pupils, past or present, was under Hugh Standish's convoy. Brisk healthy blood like Sybil's is not easily chilled : but there was warmth in the breeze, even at its freshest, and, shifting a point or two as the tide turned, it swept the cloud-banks seawards again. Soon gleams of sunshine, more and more frequent, helped to dry the drenched raiment. So there was really no good or sufficient reason for Sybil looking grave ; and, if truth must be told, the tide had slackened till egress was easy, before she was half weary of her prison-house.

Do you suppose that to Hugh Standish the time seemed long ?

Well, well : the sands—golden no longer, but dull russet grey—trickle slowly enough now for some of us ; so slowly, that the turning of the glass seems irksome labour. Yet surely he must be much better, or much worse, than his fellows, who cannot mind the time when these same grains floated and sparkled with the very swiftness of their current ; and when, had the sun gone back ten degrees on the dial, he would have looked on it less as a sign than a benevolence from Heaven.

Yet a certain temptation that you wot of, to which Hugh had nearly succumbed a while ago, did not again beset him. Divers excitements, in which recent anger had no small share, had then quickened his pulses strangely ; and the risk, whereof he could but guess at the extent, lay in his front. Now that this was overpast, and he sat at ease at Sybil's side, the thought of pressing her hand over-boldly never once crossed his mind. If he had earned any right to be presumptuous, the more reason for forbearance. There are men and men—"men and muffs," as Binks would say. Hugh was neither saint nor purist, nor an incarnation of any one cardinal virtue ; but he shrank from transgressing here, as he would have shrunk from profaning God's altar or striking a little child.

The talk did not languish, you may be sure. First, Sybil had to explain how, intent on her shell hunting, she had

wandered on further and further, till insensibly she grew weary.

"I never had such luck before," she said, plaintively, "and I never shall again. The sea has taken it all back. There was the loveliest Nautilus, that I shall never think of without tears in my eyes."

So she went on to confess, with a little hesitation, how sleep had overtaken her; but the thought uppermost in her mind as she began to dream she did not confess; though the recollection of it brought out the pink-pearl tint on her cheek brightly. Then, yet more hesitatingly, she began to speak of Mariette's strange behaviour. From earliest childhood Sybil had had an inveterate dislike to tale-bearing; and, knowing something of her companion's temper, she doubted whether it were quite safe to expound her suspicions. Nevertheless, she could not keep a secret from him just then, and so risked herself.

"It sounds dreadfully uncharitable, Hugh; but I *do* think that very odd Miss Locksley was not sorry to find me in such a plight. It is easy to fancy things when one's nerves are shaken: but I don't think it was fancy when I heard her laugh above; and the expression of her face, as she leaned over and watched me, was quite malicious at last. She spoke civilly enough, to be sure, and promised that Mr. Clyde would make haste to bring help. But he couldn't have made great haste—could he? Did you see anything of him between the cliff and the farm?"

A queer sort of smile, not altogether of amusement, flickered round the corners of Standish's mouth.

"Yes, I saw him, and it wasn't very far from the cliff either, and he hadn't overheated himself by running, certainly. If you trusted to help from that quarter, you trusted to a treacherous reed, dear. And—only think—if the wind had not been setting in-shore, I might never have heard you call."

The splendid brown eyes opened wide in angry wonder.

"Do you mean to say that he had not stirred from the spot?"

He nodded affirmatively, still smiling.

"Well, I never heard of anything so infamous," Sybil went on; "and I see nothing to laugh at, Hugh. I

wonder you didn't tell them what you thought of their conduct."

"I did tell *him*," Hugh answered quietly. "There wasn't much time for making speeches, you know; but my little oration was rather to the point, I flatter myself: at any rate, it told."

"And the words were?"

"Extemporaneous eloquence is ruined by repetition," Hugh retorted, in Johnsonian vein. "I must trouble you to imagine them; I forgot my point as soon as it was made."

"Well, but what did he answer?" she persisted. "You can remember that, at least."

"Equally impossible," Hugh replied, still sententious. "So far as I know, he kept silence even from bad words. Indeed, it must be rather difficult to shape a neat retort—lying on one's back in a furze-bush."

"Oh, Hugh! You didn't strike him?"

"I'm afraid I did," he said, still more meekly. "But don't be angry. I think I came by the worst of it. The man who, as the stage-sailor has it, 'would not succour a woman in distress,' really should not wear such prominent teeth."

With a mock piteousness, he held up his right hand which, since they came to shore, he had kept half concealed; the middle knuckle was bruised and already blackening.

Sybil shrank back into her corner, shuddering slightly. Gently and carefully, albeit not over-delicately, nurtured, she had never yet seen a blow struck in anger. These first visible signs of violence tried her nerves, already shaken, rather severely. But the repugnance was simply physical; and Sybil, who was troubled by no petty primnesses, confessed as much to herself instantly. Indeed, even the traditional "Meess Anglaise" might have refrained from much indignation here.

"I'm rather sorry, Hugh; but, in common honesty, I can't pretend to be angry. Besides, you have been quite punished enough for losing your temper. I am sure you must be in great pain."

She nestled closer again as she spoke, and, taking his hand in both her own, stroked it timidly. They talk of mesmeric anodynes. Has any professor of that queer

science yet discovered "passes," effectual as the lightest touch of Amata's cool soft palm? If the patient in this instance did not avow himself cured of all aches on the instant, be sure it was because he would have wished the healing process indefinitely prolonged. But Sybil's charity did not extend thus far: when she laid down the injured hand again on its owner's knees, a bright blush showed that she was half ashamed of her pitiful impulses; and she spoke hastily, as if to mask her confusion.

"But you are sure to hear more about it, Hugh. Now do promise me to be prudent and patient; it would be too dreadful if there were a serious quarrel."

"Quarrel!" he repeated, in huge disdain. "With a creature of that sort? Why, I'm more afraid of being torn in pieces by Flossy, than of being molested in that quarter. That 'very odd Miss Locksley' has her swain under capital command evidently; and as they are to be married in about a month, I hear, she would scarcely allow him to air his valour. No: when we meet, he will scowl and swear under his breath as he passes, and so his vengeance will evaporate. To tell you the truth, unless we publish the story, I don't think anyone in Fulmerstone will be the wiser for to-day's diversions."

She bit her rosy lip; but the smile would have way.

"Don't be so impertinent, Hugh. When we met them in the Down lane, I firmly believe they overheard your absurd quotation from Tennyson, and saw that it amused me, and bore us both a grudge thenceforth. 'Shun Superciliousness' was Alice's round-hand copy yesterday. I think you had better lay that maxim to heart. But I do hope that you are right about Fulmerstone gossip. Papa will hear everything, of couse; but everybody else need only hear how stupidly I got into a scrape, and how cleverly you got me out of it."

"A gallant feat," he said, lightly. "Why, if you had had Luath there, he could have taken you across easily, clinging to his collar. But I mean to make Alice think me quite a hero. You won't be so mean as to spoil the romance?"

I crave space for a parenthesis here.

That Hugh Standish judged his late adversary only justly, is beyond question. Indeed, though he by no

means carried his heart on his sleeve, comparative strangers seemed able to gauge pretty accurately Leonard Clyde's character; which fact might to a great extent, account for his evil repute and unpopularity. Yet, had it been otherwise, it is hard to see how he could have avenged himself here. A street brawl, even if he had entered on it with equal chances, would scarcely have much mended matters; and how otherwise was he to redress himself? Amongst social anomalies, the law of honour, as at present constituted in this great Protestant country, is assuredly not the least curious. Take the profession for instance, which, from immemorial time, has been supposed to stand most keenly on punctilio. If an officer on home service accepts gross insult tamely, he meets with short and sharp shrift from the *Vehm-gericht* of his brothers in arms. If he resents himself in the "old free fashion," a court-martial will only anticipate the verdict of a common jury.

Prudent and politic Prussia, under the rule of the most Christian of all sovereigns, ordains these matters differently. If hand be laid on the sacred uniform—I believe *ober-leutenants* seldom even sleep in *mufti*—the wearer thereof is bound to draw sword and deal with the aggressor, even as the prophet dealt with the Amalekite; and is only liable to rebuke or penalty, in case of failing in this manifest duty. If the offender—or perhaps the originally aggrieved party—chancing to be "heeled" should stand stoutly on his defence, and by misadventure make a death-vacancy in the 250th Uhlans, presently when arraigned for his life, he will discover that there may be grim earnest in the old stage joke, "If I kill you, it's nothing; if you kill me, it's murder." All this sounds absurd, of course; but I fancy the case is not overstated and, at any rate, the system has the merit of consistency.

With our improved English notions, a man of peace, no less than a man of war, may find himself in grave dilemma. Not long ago, a wise and moderate American, quite free from Anglophobia—lauding divers of our institutions—remarked severely on the fashion in which the names of women, still holding their own in society, if not of absolute unspotted repute, were bandied to and fro in club smoking-rooms. Such licence, he averred, could scarce be used

with impunity in a bar-room of his own Far West. And when these his notions were published here, there was none to say him nay.

Putting evil speaking, lying, and slandering out of the question, it cannot be denied that our Fescennine freedom of speech has increased, and that words are sometimes emphasised by gestures yet more unseemly. Orators of the Stryver type are more common than ever, and browbeating is not confined to the police courts. If matters progress in this direction, it will soon not be safe to enter on an argument, giving physical weight away; and, on the old Cyclic principle, the extremes of civilisation and barbarism will nearly meet. I suppose, at the core, we are not less courteous than our neighbours; yet it is certain that such things would not pass in any foreign Cercle or Casino, even when the blood of the gilded youth has waxed hot with wine or play.

In these mechanical times, a Court of Honour would be as impossible as a Court of Love. And so our "humane" legislators have brought us to this—that for the grossest conceivable contumely there is no requital, short of personal assault, save what can be granted by a civil tribunal. Surely "humanity," as interpreted by Richard, King of Connemara, was better than this. You will say that there is no lack of ground beyond the sea where a bitter quarrel may be voided to the bitter end. This is true—but in the letter only. Did you ever know a dull farce improved by translation? Only last spring, two men started on such an errand, one of whom was guilty towards the other of the single wrong that by Pagan, Jew, Infidel, and Christian has, up to this our time, been held past forgiveness. Well: when their purpose was noised abroad, the odds against bloodshedding averaged about 100—5; and they were landed easily.

Is there no remedy? In an inquisitive rather than a cavilling spirit, this query is propounded. Nevertheless, it will probably be useless to pause for a reply.

Very light of heart were Sybil and her squire, though outwardly in sorry case, as they hastened homewards over the wet glistening sands, and very lightly they talked of

their sea-pranks. And yet each had that day eaten, un-
awares, of a strange fruit—a fruit that sooner or later
almost all lips must taste; though some, perchance, ere
they savour it thoroughly, are wizened with age—a fruit
round whose first freshness clings ever a faint fragrance of
forfeit paradise—a fruit that hangs on the lowermost boughs
of the great Knowledge Tree, infinite and eternal.





CHAPTER XI.

SYBIL'S ABDICATION.

FOR some time after, at Fulmerstone, the current of the days ran even. Hugh Standish was right in surmising that the gossips would hear little of Sybil's adventure. Indeed, beyond a vague rumour that she had been caught by the tide, and escaped with a slight wetting, nothing of the truth oozed out. Preparations for his approaching marriage, which was now publicly announced, sufficiently accounted for Leonard Clyde's temporary absence; and Miss Locksley's demeanour, whenever she encountered any of the Coniston party, was enough to throw suspicion off the scent. Sybil herself more than once doubted whether her senses had not deceived her, and whether those serene unconscious eyes were the same that had gleamed so maliciously, as they peered down over the edge of the cliff.

Only to Harradine, whom she had learned to treat as wise men treat their lawyers, did Mariette speak of her discomfiture—no other word so well fits the state of her feelings on that eventful afternoon—and she met with cold sympathy here. Though he was inland bred, and had never studied a line of astronomy, “the way of a ship in the sea, and the way of the moon among the stars,” were less puzzling to Pete than the ways of womankind. Contentiousness to any amount, when there was anything worth wrangling for, he

could understand. Neither was he above bearing a grudge on substantial grounds ; but animosity, provoked by a supercilious glance or a covert smile in passing, was quite beyond him. From old associations, he had rather a respect for the Queen's commission—it was a “qualification,” if nothing else—and how an officer on full pay, in aiding and abetting a piece of girlish spite, could incur grosser contumely than had ever befallen him, Pete Armstrong, whilst earning that *sobriquet*, he failed to comprehend.

“It ain't business—that's all about it,” he said very dryly. And Mariette, for once, accepted censure meekly. Indeed, looking back on these things, she could not but confess that she had been near paying an extravagant price for the indulgence of an unprofitable fancy. To say nothing of the account to which she and her companion must sooner or later have been called, had any real harm happened to Miss Coniston—setting aside, too, the chances of their supineness being published abroad—there was always danger of Leonard's turning, in the fury of his disgrace, on the second cause thereof, and casting off his allegiance entirely. Because these dangers seemed overpast, not less sharp was Mariette's self-chiding, and not less firm her resolve to abstain from like imprudence in the future. Revenge, whether light or grave, she told herself, was a luxury after all ; and, as such, clearly beyond the reach of a prudent young person on her promotion. Perhaps, some day, she might be able to afford some such indulgence ; and then those who lived should see.

Mariette did not choose to make full confession to her father : yet she might have done so safely. Each day, that strange lethargy of mind and body, of which mention has been made, seemed to strengthen its hold on him. The brief flash of energy, when he bestirred himself in the marriage negotiations, had told in the way of reaction ; and very few things could now move Arthur Locksley even to anger. The sharp paroxysms were rarer, but those ominous fainting fits more frequent ; and it was evident that he did not like being left long alone. Nevertheless, conversation, it was just as evident, rather annoyed than amused him ; he never, by any chance, opened a book, and, after just glancing at the sporting intelligence, seldom took up a daily

paper. He would sit in his wheeled chair for hours ; with the white slender hands, of which he used to be so proud, folded on his knees—absolutely motionless, save when a slight frown betrayed a passing twitch of pain—always gazing out far to sea. He went to rest early, and his nights passed tranquilly ; at any rate, he did not complain of wakefulness, and the call-bell, placed close to his hand, was never rung.

Only on two points did he manifest any strength of purpose or will ; and on these two his ancient obstinacy came out to the full. Neither chiding nor persuasion—and Harradine, to say nothing of Mariette, employed both freely—could induce Captain Locksley to avail himself of any medical aid from far or near. He would not argue the question ; but declined firmly, and not always mildly. On the second point there was even sharper dispute.

Acting on the sound Turf principle, that “a bet is never good till it is hedged,” when the Pirate became a leading favourite for the Wessex Stakes, Pete was very anxious to lay off at least so much of their long odds as to make them sure, if moderate, winners. But Locksley was a very flint-stone here ; and, though Harradine could have insisted on dealing with his own share of the bet after his own pleasure, he somehow shrank from doing so, and consented to “go for the gloves in earnest ;” indemnifying himself by many inward anathemas, and much grumbling to Mariette. He had, as you know, his own quaint notions about “thieves’ honour ;” and, if the ship was to be wrecked in this venture, had no mind to save himself on a raft.

Furthermore, Captain Locksley ordained that the marriage, which, on account of his health, was to be strictly private, should take place on the very day of the Wessex Stakes. This fancy of the sick man met with no opposition. All days were the same to Mariette ; and her betrothed, amongst whose weaknesses backing of horses was not reckoned, could scarce have told the date of any race-meeting, great or small. Harradine remarked discontentedly that, “if he wasn’t allowed to hedge, he might as well be at Fulmerstone as at Redwood ; and that he did not care to look on, whilst the Pirate was beat a short head.” So the family autocrat held his own to the last.

Piers Coniston, when he heard all, was not inclined to look on the adventure so lightly as the principal actors therein did, or affected to do. All their jesting could not blind him to the fact, that his chiefest earthly treasure had been in peril; and the grotesque details failed to provoke even a faint smile, when he thought of Sybil standing alone betwixt the cruel cliff and the hungry waves. Of the numberless thanksgivings that have gone up to heaven, since the patriarch's hand was stayed on Mount Moriah, few have been more sincere than Coniston's that night. Outwardly, he was not expansive in gratitude; for "Thank you, Hugh," was hardly oratorical. But there was a world of meaning in the lingering hand-clasp which emphasised those three brief syllables; and the other felt as if his willing help was already overpaid.

Yet how large and liberal was the payment, Standish never guessed either then or thereafter. Like many another gallant gentleman, Coniston was perhaps foolishly oblivious of injuries; but a kindness once laid up in his memory neither perished nor faded. If a mere fisher-boy had done him the like service, Piers would never have balanced the account off-hand by a prompt guerdon; he would have kept the lad in sight, and aided him in a dozen ways more delicately efficaciously; and, if the object of his bounty had proved unworthy, he would have been slow to withdraw help after he had been forced to withdraw sympathy. And was this benefactor likely to fare worse, because for years past he had stood in Coniston's affections only a little lower than his own children?

With all these things in his heart, he so dissembled that, after chiding Sybil gently for her imprudence in rambling so far alone, and exacting a promise against like rashness for the future, he seemed to dismiss the subject from his mind entirely. But for the next few days, the City knew him not; and in his waking hours, Sybil was hardly ever out of his sight. In the course of that happy week, the students, great and small, got two whole holidays without the trouble of asking.

Yonder niche of rock was not quickly forgotten by either of its occupants. Hugh's recollections of the adventure itself were wholly ludicrous; nevertheless, he somehow felt

drawn closer to his companion in that brief captivity than heretofore. Indeed, it seemed as though a certain link now existed betwixt them. It might be frailer than a thread of gossamer: yet—it was there. More than once in his dreams, or half waking from the light healthy sleep familiar to his age, the situation came back to him vividly. He felt once more the dainty little head pillowed on his shoulder as he swam, and the willowy waist yielding not unwillingly to his support, and the touch of soft fingers, soothing, if not quite caressing, his bruised hand; and whether it was a dream or half-dream, Hugh did not care to break it. Only, when he next met Sybil, with such images fresh in his mind, his cheek would flush, despite himself, at it might have done if some over-bold speech had heedlessly passed his lips. In very deed, he never did so offend; and, if his manner and tone towards her were changed in any wise, they were perhaps just a shade less familiar.

And over Sybil, too, a change had come, of which she was perhaps even less conscious. She was like a queen who had just abdicated, most willingly and joyfully, but who has none the less ceased to reign. That mock authority—not so unreal after all—to which Hugh was wont to bow with a humility not only feigned, had vanished utterly.

He might have spoken but the truth in saying that Luath, the deerhound, would have carried her just as safely through the rising water. Well—and, in such a case, would she not thenceforth have honoured Luath above all others, and set him up in a niche beside Gelert and other heroes of his kind? When her need grew bitter and her strait sore, on whom had she cried for help, and from whom had the help come so speedily? What had changed the frown of the sky into a smile, and the moan of the tide into a murmur, and the throbbing of her heart into a quick pleasant beating, but the strong brave presence in which she felt safe instantly—so safe, that she could afford to make mock at the malice of the sea and the malice above? And when she feigned to reprove him because, even in his haste to bring her succour, he had found time to punish those who would have done her despite, he had not even defended himself, bowing his head to the smiter. That was her last, her very last, act of tyranny. She knew that, if once she let slip the sceptre,

there was danger that another hand might grasp it ere long. Nevertheless, frankly and freely she laid it down.

Dearer to woman's heart than aught else, material or immaterial,—poets, schoolmen, and philosophers aver,—is power. Luckily, exceptions only prove a rule; for a verier woman never breathed than this Sybil of ours; and, when she made this confession to herself—it was long before any other guessed the secret—it cost her never a sigh. All this is but the beginning of the end, you will say. Ay; but

Is the end, then, far away?
Far—how far no man can say.

Furthermore, betwixt the end we shape, and that shapen for us by hands immortal and invisible, is there not often difference, wide as that which severs light from darkness, joy from sorrow, life from death?





CHAPTER XII.

SUCCESS AT LAST.

THE parish church of Fulmerstone was quite in keeping with the original aspect of the place. A sober unpretending edifice; yet one could not but approve the sturdy strength of the low ashlar tower, and the luxuriant ivy mantling the walls, up to the eaves, on the side sheltered from the sea-winds. Since the influx of visitors set in, a bran-new district chapel had sprung up—a model of cheap tawdriness, from the stucco mouldings over the western doorway to the staring vane topping the meagre spire. Souls were saved there, on the very newest principles, by a skilled elocutionist who declaimed in the reading-desk, and in the pulpit roared you mild as any sucking dove; and thither the lovers of strong meat resorted, and were fed to the full. But the ancient rector of Fulmerstone—sometime Fellow of St. Botolph's—vexed himself with no thoughts of rivalry; and, Sabbath after Sabbath, maundered through his mild dilutions of the Pauline epistles in the regular Common-room drone. He liked to hear himself talk, and his old parishioners humoured him in point of attendance, although not of attention; for, if he had glanced up from his sermon-book on certain sultry afternoons, he might have looked down on a whole congregation of Eutychi.

Yet the Rev. Clement Dormer would have been greatly disquieted, if there had been any marked falling off in his rectorial fees. Not that he was covetous by nature; but he

stood on his privileges, holding that for marriages or burials no other than a parish-church bell had a right to chime or toll. And even stray sojourners at Fulmerstone, on the first point at least, seemed to be of this opinion. For on the rare occasions of such weddings, the pair, whether of high or low degree, almost invariably plighted their troth in the dingy chancel that looked as if it had never been painted afresh since the days of good Queen Anne.

Within that same chancel, one August morning, was mustered a small party with a purpose that you may easily divine. The twin cherubs, who, for a century or more, had hovered above the humble altar, had looked down on many homely weddings, but seldom on a soberer one than this.

Mr. Clyde, senior, had written civilly enough, if not over cordially; hoping that Leonard would bring his bride home without delay, but excusing himself from being present at the ceremony on the plea of distance and press of business affairs. Also the bride's father was conspicuous by his absence; but the plea of ill-health here was no vain pretext. Indeed, Captain Locksley seemed worse than usual that morning; and Harradine, though he kept his misgivings to himself, hesitated more than once about leaving him alone, even whilst the ceremony was in progress.

Mariette was given away by a kinsman who, chancing to be in the neighbourhood, had consented, somewhat ungraciously, to take the part—a small, sallow, wizened creature with a skin like tense parchment: looking as if he had been unwound from his cerements specially for the occasion, and would return to his mummy-case when his duty was done. But he was a Locksley *pur sang*, the main point after all. A subaltern of his regiment, whom Leonard had captured on his passage through town, acted as best man, and the two “cast-iron cousins” as bridesmaids. Sooth to speak—these damsels—even in wedding garments acid and austere—did not greatly add to the festivity of the scene. Pete Harradine, discarding his horsey attire, had struggled pain, fully into a stiff habit of ceremony; and, feeling about as much at his ease as a city knight for the first time donning court costume, did not attempt to dissemble his constraint.

Neither did the bridegroom bear himself gallantly. That he should look awkward was natural enough ; but the puffed, flushed cheek and swollen eyelids showed plainly enough how he had tried to steady his nerves ; and the repeated "caulkers" could not keep his fingers from trembling as they held out the ring.

Only Mariette was quite equal to the occasion. She was very simply attired—more simply even than her gaunt bride-maidens. But had you, before this, questioned her title to beauty, you would never have disputed it now. Many a daughter of the Leasowes, espousing the Prince Charming of her girlish dreams, had smiled less confidently ; and the tawny eyes, affecting no maidenly diffidence, gleamed with saucy triumph—even as they gleamed, on a morning you wot of, when she had doffed her disguise at the foot of Baron Down.

It was thoroughly Wessex weather outside—such weather as can hardly be matched far from either shore of the Channel. A heavy sea-fog, lifting ever and anon tantalisingly, as if to show what the day might be if the sun could only have his way, and then forging ahead more stubbornly till, on wood, stone, iron, and turf, the same clogging damp had settled down ; whilst the atmosphere grew so close and murky that even a *sirocco* would have been welcome. The church doors were closed ; but the subtle vapour somehow stole in, trickling in heavy drops down the window-panes, and causing the old rector—always somewhat thick of speech—to wheeze asthmatically. Of all the surroundings, nothing perhaps went so inerrily as the bell in the ashlar tower overhead—cracked last Christmas by the over-zeal of a bibulous ringer.

However, things, tedious as a benison spoken by the Rev. Clement Dormer, come to an end ; and, in due time, the parish register of Fulmerstone was enriched by a fine specimen of firm caligraphy in the very latest signature of Mariette Locksley.

The marriage-feast was on a like modest scale with the rest of the arrangements. Ernest the cousin, and Lieutenant Streatfield the bridesman, were the only strangers bidden thereto ; for Captain Locksley was utterly unequal to entertain female guests. Perhaps, had he been in rude health,

he would have shrunk from making talk for those grim white women and their awesome parent. But the meats were admirably cooked and served, and the liquors undeniable; and the host, though he looked terribly white and worn, did the honours with the grace and courtesy that he could always assume, with a purpose in view. The cousin Ernest—waxing charitable as his sluggish blood warmed with good cheer—watched him half wondering, half admiringly; and remembered how in old times he, a hard-working Admiralty clerk, used to envy the splendid guardsman fluttering hither and thither with his butterfly wings. Indeed, the prim old bachelor was so influenced at last by his surroundings, that he began to chirp faded compliments in the bride's ears; and "carried" her in a feeble toast, to which no one thought it necessary to respond.

The bridesman, too, was greatly impressed by what he saw and heard; and, whilst feeding largely, and drinking to match, found time to wonder—not ungrudgingly—at his comrade's good luck.

"They're following the money; that's about it," he remarked to himself consolingly. "Calico" (this was Leonard's nickname in the corps) "ain't much of a catch as he stands. But, if they've heard his elder brother's shaky, that would quite account for it. I hope they'll join before I go on long leave. If the lady's as lively as she looks, she'll wake up even that Irish dog-hole of ours. And what a thoroughbred one the father is, too! I wonder where Calico ever found the pluck to propose."

Nevertheless, before breakfast was over, though he far transgressed his usual wine regimen, Captain Locksley's face looked terribly wan and weary; and Mariette, who, whilst she affected no anxiety, had not ceased to watch her father, noticed that his eyes were always wandering towards the clock. So she broke up the revel, on pretext of making her preparations; for the newly married pair were to start by an afternoon train for town, on their way to the North. Mariette would not consent to leave Fulmerstone till the result of the Wessex Stakes was known; and Clyde, after a faint show of resistance on the ground of late journeying, was fain to let her have her way.

In those days telegraph wires did not extend to every

village post-office ; and it was necessary that Harradine should ride some three or four leagues to a central station, to receive the message from the course. With a groan of relief, he doffed his "go-to-meeting" clothes, and donned the familiar overalls. Before he mounted his hack—a fabulous screw, but the best that Fulmerstone could boast—he wheeled Locksley's chair to his favourite corner in the little garden, sheltered both from wind and sun. For the mists, vanquished at last, had rolled suddenly back to their sea-lair, and there was not a fleck now in the still summer sky. Hence there was a view, not over the sea alone, but down the road leading to Brislington, whither Harradine was bound.

"Keep yourself quite quiet, and keep a good heart up," quoth Pete. "I've a fancy to-day will be lucky, after all, for the lot of us. Missy looks bright enough, don't she ? That's one pull. Now, don't you worry yourself with looking out, till about five o'clock or so ; then look out as hard as you please. If I hold my hat up at the turn of the road, you'll know it's all right, and the odds are landed. If it's the other way—well—don't fret about it. The locker won't be quite empty, and we'll try another long shot."

There was a kind of tenderness in his manner, quite different from its usual gruff good nature, as he stopped to arrange a cushion which had slipped awry. And Locksley looked up at his confederate, with something more nearly akin to gratitude in his eyes than perhaps any creature, living or dead, had ever seen there.

"You're a better sort than folks call you, Pete Armstrong," he said huskily, with an emphasis on the last word. "I thought you'd have cut up rough about that 'hedging.' But, somehow—now—I don't think you'll twit me with missing even the place-money, if our horse runs second. I did it for the best. I did it for—the—best."

The last broken syllables were almost inaudible, and the speaker's head drooped more wearily again. Yet, you see, only half the other's remark was answered. Till the result of the race was known, the gamester could scarce spare a thought to the future of his only child.

"That's just the way I look at it," the other answered, rather forcing a laugh. "But I mustn't waste more time here.

"There's none to spare ; for I daren't send those fore-legs any pace down hill. Missy—I'll have to drop calling her that—will be down as soon as she's finished her packing. I suppose you won't want anyone else?"

So Pete departed. And the two strangers, after brief leave-taking and expressions of stock good wishes, also went their way. The bridegroom, having some vague idea that it would be indecorous to show himself abroad, and not venturing to disturb the packing mysteries, solaced himself with much solitary smoke, not unmoistened ; subsiding eventually into a jerky, stertorous doze.

Mariette, busy as she was, came to offer to bear her father company ; but though he spoke more gently than was his wont, he would by no means have it so ; and thinking that he might rest better if left alone, she went back to her chamber.

The door of the dining-room stood a little ajar, and in passing, she peeped in. There, amongst the relics of the wedding-feast, sat the man she had sworn to honour, with flushed cheeks and blinking eyes—loading the air, heavy enough already, with coarse tobacco fumes, and looking guiltily out of place in the clear sunshine. Mariette never winced or shrank as she turned away. But if marriages are made in heaven, some angel should have bowed his head in shame, at sight of such an expression on the face of a maiden bride.

Even in sober Fulmerstone, there were some mild sporting folk to whom the result of the Wessex Stakes was a matter of no slight interest ; and—the nature of Harradine's errand to Brislington having oozed out—a group of these was gathered outside the door of the billiard-room, watching for his return. As the quarter past five was chiming on the old church clock, Pete rode briskly up the main street. His hard-bitten face was stolid as ever ; but a familiar might have guessed, from its very setness, that he was hiding some strong emotion. However, as he drew rein, for a second, opposite the knot of loungers, it did relax into a saturnine smile.

"Pirate first, Augur second, and Estelle third."

And having let fall these words, without waiting to hear whether they were of good or ill import to his hearers, he

rode on—silent and serene as the Great Twins who told in Rome how the battle had gone on the banks of the Regillus. But before he cleared the street, he had quickened his pace from a trot to a canter, and, as he reached the turn of the road aforesaid, he lifted his hat high in air with an exultant wave.

The distance between them was not so great but that those keen eyes of Pete's, trained by long practice, could distinguish each movement of the figure half reclining in the wheeled chair. He saw the invalid actually spring to his feet, as he had never done since the rheumatic fever crippled him, pressing both his hands tight on his side. Then the hands dropped down till they clutched the arms of the chair; and so supporting himself, Arthur Locksley sank gently backwards and lay stone-still.

Driving his heels furiously into its ribs, Harradine lifted his tired hack, and a very few strides brought him to the house-door. Flinging the reins loose there, he vaulted over the garden fence, shouting aloud to Mariette as he sprang. Another second showed him that his misgivings of late, and his fears just now, had not outrun the truth.

Yes, the gloves were won. But they would never be worn by the pale hands lying idly there. The roar of the Ring itself, rampant in victory or rabid in defeat, would be as utter silence to those heedless ears. Those tired eyes were gazing now across no summer sea, but over an Ocean never sounded by plumb-line, never furrowed by keel, never ruffled by storm, in which vaster worlds than ours would be but as islets, and the shores whereof Omniscience cannot discern.

If not a Nemesis, it was surely a cruel irony of fate.

Diligently but unprofitably, for many years, this man had been casting seed into the Devil's Acre; and he had not been permitted to pluck one ear of the golden harvest when it came. Since boyhood, perhaps, his pulse had not beat thrice unselfishly; and he died of disease of the heart.



CHAPTER XIII.

“TO LOVE, HONOUR AND OBEY.”



ALWAYS implacable, the Dark Angel is not always pitiless; and when his office is performed, deigns to mitigate his aspect under various guises. Not the rarest of these is that of Intercessor. Never was mortal tongue so likely to incline the Court, even against its better judgment, to mercy as the mute pleading of death; and of any that have held a brief, I fancy the Satanic advocate in old days, must have had least heart in his cause. Even as features, in life harsh and uncouth, acquire a strange softness and refinement under the eternal calm,—so deeds and words, awhile ago black and bitter, seem toned down now into harmless neutrality. Perhaps the stern maxim, “Be just before you are generous,” should apply even here: yet the stoicism that is quite proof against such influence, is hardly admirable.

At any rate, Mariette’s philosophy did not carry her thus far. If she stood dry-eyed beside her father’s corpse, it was because sorrow or grief, of whatsoever kind, with her could scarce find vent in tears: that she was both shocked and grieved, after her fashion, is certain. Filial reverence she had long ceased to feel; and perhaps the dead man had done his utmost to check the spring of filial love at its fountain-head. Nevertheless, looking on the white worn

face—even in its quietude piteously significant of pain—the girl would have given much to alter or amend the past. The keen, cold speeches, against whose sting she was not always fully armed, she could forget now; only remembering that he had been gentler with her of late—that he had taxed his failing strength, and struggled against the fatal lethargy, to guard her interests in the contract entered on of her own free will—that not two hours ago, whilst his hand rested on hers, he had wished her happy. The spirit of self-reliance was strong within her as ever; yet there was a void in her life after all.

Perhaps no stranger, or even ordinary acquaintance, seeing how calmly and collectedly she took her full share in all needful arrangements, would have given her credit for even so much feeling. But Pete Harradine thoroughly understood her, and was agreeably surprised. He was not at all delicate or sensitive in such matters. Nevertheless, the smouldering hostility betwixt father and daughter had always rather troubled him; and he was glad to see peace betwixt them at the very last. He was himself touched by the catastrophe more deeply than he cared to show. It was scarcely a home, measured by the usual domestic standard, that he had found with the Locksleys; but it was mooring-ground to the battered castaway. And now he was sent adrift again, without rudder or compass, to be tossed hither and thither till his time should come to be stranded—a worthless piece of flotsam. They had passed through dangerous straits together, these two, since they first became allies; and just when the luck seemed turning, and the good time coming, the confederacy was broken. They had always been hampered by want of means; but, with the Pirate money at their back, they might have made a stroke worthy of record in turf-chronicles.

"What nerve he had!" Pete mused, admiringly—standing alone by the coffin, just before it was closed. "That's where real clean breeding tells, you see. I ain't a very soft one myself; but I flinch when it comes to the last squeeze. What did he say, when I worried him to get out? 'Muddle away your own money, and be d—d to you. You sha'n't hedge a shilling of mine.' (If the words had conveyed a delicate compliment, he could not have recalled them with

greater gusto.) A good judge, too : if everyone had their due, I'd get only jackal's pickings. Well—I won't touch the money he saved me, till a pinch comes. Missy may want it some day. She's made a bad bargain, I doubt, after all."

A bad bargain? Another besides Pete Armstrong began to realise that fact very thoroughly, even in these early days. Rely on it, in the matrimonial horoscope there is no more fatal sign, than when a pair lately wedded are thrust further apart, instead of being drawn closer together, in a time of mourning.

Leonard Clyde had one chance—a very faint and slight one, perhaps, but still a chance—of gaining some hold on his wife's gratitude, if not on her affections, whilst her nature was for a brief space softened,—by comporting himself suitably to the season. He so utterly misused the opportunity, that no wonder it was turned against him. Doubtless, the upsetting of all his plans was a grave contrariety : neither could he be expected to sorrow deeply for one whom he had scarcely known. Some slight show of sympathy, however, would not have been out of place ; and he need not have been so palpably sordid in his anxieties, so coarsely selfish in his regrets.

If Mariette had ever seriously purposed to improve the manners or the *morale* of her spouse, all such kindly intents vanished during that dreamy decameron. Henceforth, so long as he did not so personally molest her—on this point she felt tolerably safe—he might be as sottish, and stupid, and sullen as he would. What availed it to polish the outside of a cup, within which were the very dregs of baseness ?

With open eyes, and in full possession of his senses, such as they were, Leonard Clyde had elected to take a portionless wife ; nevertheless, had he been defrauded of a large promised dower, he could scarce have grumbled more when it was made plain that—putting his Pirate winnings out of the question—Arthur Locksley had left behind scarcely more than sufficed for his decent burial. Practical, if not prudent, to the last, he had indulged in no such useless formality as a will. After those same winnings, or at least a share thereof, the gallant bridegroom hankered hugely ; but he was utterly baffled here. Harradine was neither to

be browbeaten nor cajoled; and his stroughold of non-admission might have defied a more skilful besieger. He had no accounts to render, he said: the money had been put on in his (Harradine's) name; and the winnings were his, to deal with as he listed. He would start the happy couple with a hundred down, and promise another when they were established in their Irish quarters; but to any liberality beyond this he declined to pledge himself. Oddly enough, the bride, when appealed to, manifested neither disappointment nor discontent; indeed, she further exasperated her husband by thanking Pete quite graciously for his "present." Leonard's surprise might have been lessened, and his irritation at this behaviour increased, could he have overheard a certain conversation betwixt the other two.

There are coincidences enough, Heaven knows, in this world of ours; but I think the anomalies are still more frequent and curious. Most people, familiar with Pete Armstrong's past and present career, would have thought twice before they trusted him with the changing of a cheque. Mariette—prone both by nature and training to mistrust all things and all men—left in his hands, uncounted, every shilling to which she had moral or legal claim, with confidence not less implicit than you would feel in depositing your plate in your banker's strong-room.

Finally, with much snarling and growling, Clyde took the sop dropped to him. Perhaps the hardest trial was when Pete returned from town after realising his winnings: he was forced to go up for this purpose the very day before the funeral. Of the amount of the *coup* Leonard had no idea; and large as it was, his fancy probably exaggerated it. Certain it is that, during all that evening, he was possessed by one of those fascinations which have drawn not a few misers to desperate and miserable ends. To his jaundiced eyes Harradine appeared the very incarnation of wealth. He imagined the shabby shooting-jacket lined and padded with crisp notes, of which he could almost hear the rustle, and the pockets of the tight overalls swollen with coin. Whilst Pete smoked in the open air that night, the other hovered about, keeping mostly in the shadow; just as a pirate shallot may, under cover of darkness, have hovered around a galleon becalmed in the Spanish Main.

Pete was partly conscious of these manœuvres ; and they amused him not a little.

"He'd cut my throat, if he dared, that skulker," he remarked to himself, with a caustic chuckle.

There was more truth in the words than the speaker dreamed of. The temptation never took actual form or substance. But, if the scene had been shifted to a desert, with no witnesses but the stars, and Clyde had had no account to render to man, there might have been crime black and treacherous before morning.

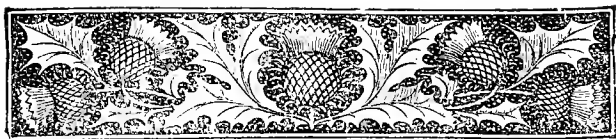
In the day when all secrets shall be made manifest, will the would-be assassins and the would-be adulterers fare alike ; or when he who hath, in thought, coveted his neighbour's wife is arraigned, will he who hath, in like fashion, coveted his neighbour's blood pass out free ?

However, with Clyde, as with others of his stamp, a small cunning often did duty for tact ; and "Never show your teeth till you can bite" was amongst the few wise saws that he remembered. So, at the funeral—just a shade quieter than the wedding—on the following day, he bore himself decorously, if sullenly ; and at the leave-taking—he and Mariette started for town that same evening—he did not decline Harradine's proffered hand. He winced a little, certainly, as he watched his wife's farewell ; for, indeed, Mariette was moved beyond her wont at parting from her ancient ally. There were no tears in her eyes ; but, since her mother died, her lips had never bestowed so warm a caress, as when they lingered on Pete's weather-beaten cheek, and they never afterwards bestowed a more honest one. Even Leonard's coarse, crass nature was dimly aware of this ; and, for a moment or two, he grudged the other something more than his Pirate winnings. Already, however, he was in fairly good training ; and, when Mariette exacted a promise from Pete that he should visit them as soon as they were established in Ireland, the husband only entered the silent protest of a scowl.

Under such auspices as you have seen, the wedded pair departed. And Harradine turned back into the lonely house, where there were still some few last arrangements to be made, with a sinking of spirit such as he had not known when the tide of his changeful fortunes was at the

lowest ebb. The ranks of his friends had been growing thinner and thinner of late, and the gap that the last week had made was little likely to be filled. Nevertheless, his heart was heavier for the living than for the dead.





CHAPTER XIV

MARIETTE'S HONEYMOON

SOME time ago, as many of us may remember, there prevailed in this England of ours a certain moral malady, fortunately very brief in duration and limited in influence; or the consequences might have been still more disastrous. It was scarcely an epidemic; for the symptoms were exclusively feminine, and affected only a small and select class of society. This was the *Morbus Fugitivus*.

When the last coach ceased to run, and grass began to sprout round the threshold of all the posting-stables along the North Road, trade naturally fell away at the Gretna Green smithy, and elopements went quite out of fashion. After a long interval, without any ostensible cause, came a sudden revival, and one demoiselle after another, all of more or less high degree, chose to signalise herself by furtive nuptials. In many of these cases even the excuse of austere parents or unrelenting guardians was a-wanting; and the lovers might just as well have plighted troth, with full form and ceremony, in their own parish church at high noon.

Amongst the victims of this fitful fever was the daughter of a very ancient house: the partner of her flight was a soldier, and a gallant one to boot; well fitted both by face and figure to "ride among the knights," albeit his birth was scarcely equestrian. Whilst the wrath of the *père noble*

was cooling, the runaways took shelter with the bridegroom's parents, and found ample welcome there. Now the Lady Corisande—whatever she may have done in after years—had not, then, had time to regret her venture. She was perfectly devoted to her handsome husband, and saw all his belongings through a glass, rosily. Nevertheless, in a letter of hers, bearing this date, addressed to her prime confidante, an enthusiastic description of her place of refuge winds up thus :—

“ Indeed, my dear, till now I had not the slightest notion of the style in which *these people live*.”

That sentiment, I believe, was prompted less by patrician insolence, than by the natural surprise of one entering on a social phrase quite new and strange.

Some such ideas, though she never put them into downright words, not seldom occurred to the bride Mariette during the latter half of her honeymoon.

Being a Glaswegian of credit and renown, Mr. Clyde, senior, had naturally sought his *Lust in Rust* on the shores of Loch Lomond. The house was sufficiently well arranged within, though, without, a very eyesore to an architect in its pseudo-Italian vulgarity ; and not ill placed, though lacking background and shade—both of which might have been found not a furlong further back in the hanging woodlands. But the master of Glencorquodale chose to be seen as well as to see ; and had certainly so far succeeded, that few tourists, as they steamed by, failed to inquire who owned the mansion that seemed to return their gaze with interest from its vantage-ground.

Glencorquodale had been inhabited for some years now ; yet nothing there seemed to have lost the first uncomfortable gloss of novelty. Everything shone provokingly ; gorgeous plate, glistening furniture, gleaming hothouses, and staring *parterres*, seemed to cry aloud to the visitor, “ Count how much I cost.”

And the inhabitants, sooth to speak, matched not ill with their dwelling.

The head of the house, dogmatic and dictatorial, yet fussy to a degree ; the mistress, portly and florid, but full of invalid *minauderies* ; the heir, and older and thinner edition of Leonard, with much the same vices apparently, and a

weaker constitution to back them ; the sister, eldest of the three, harsh voiced and hard featured, consoling herself for enforced celibacy by acrid asceticism and petty tyrannies—each, in their several parts, helped to make up the veriest burlesque that you can imagine of that fine old stock piece, *The Laird's Family*.

Howsoever the weather without might change, the domestic barometer of Glencorquodale kept pretty steady at "Stormy." Mariette's own home, as you know, had been far from a happy one, and with dissensions she was tolerably familiar ; but Arthur Locksley, at the worst of his temper, was rather caustic than coarse of tongue, and there was usually some polish, as well as point, in his sarcasms. When Harradine intervened in the discussion, there was occasionally some pretty plain speaking ; but the girl, on the whole, had been used, if not to fine fencing, to sparring according to the recognised rules ; and the clapper-clawing here was quite new to her. It began by amusing, and finished by boring her ; and neither impression was she careful to dissemble.

Indeed, it cannot be affirmed that in any one respect she took pains to conciliate her new relatives. Each and every inferior member of this small corporate body was in a state of chronic disloyalty towards the head ; but none had as yet gone in for such absolute independence as was asserted by the dauntless little alien. One instance of this may suffice.

If in other points of the law they were not blameless, the household of Glencorquodale in their Sabbath duties were most regular. No stranger, tarrying within those gates, was exempt from the iron rule of attendance at kirk : if the road was barely passable, the state of the weather mattered not. On the Sunday forenoon after the arrival of the newly married pair, the family procession was mustered as usual in the great drawing-room, and ready to start : they were only waiting for the bride, who, since breakfast, had been invisible. Jerking out his watch every second, Mr. Clyde fidgetted to and fro : the entry of the Glencorquodale party into the kirk was ever a matter of no small pomp and ceremony ; and if it were made hurriedly or late—notably on an occasion special as this—it would be a shame crying in the face of Heaven.

"Go and bring your wife down at once, Leonard—at once : do you hear ?" he said at last, testily.

And, for a wonder, the son did as he was bid without murmuring.

Minute after minute slipped by till hurry, at least, became inevitable ; and still there were no signs of the laggard. When Mr. Clyde's irritation had almost reached its climax, Leonard reappeared, disconcerted and sullen.

"She—don't—mean—coming," he said, slowly and reluctantly.

An Orsini shell, lighting on the centre rose of the gorgeous flower-carpet, could scarce have caused more consternation. For a few seconds each gazed on his or her fellow in mute horror ; even Leonard, the scapegrace of the family, looked frightened and ill at ease. Mr. Clyde stood purple and speechless ; and only after a struggle for breath—being plethoric of habit, she was easily "winded" by any strong emotion—his wife managed to gasp out—

"Rhoda, go to her instantly."

Now be it known that the rest of her family, though they bore her little love, did greatly respect the valour of this stalwart virgin ; and, in warfare with any foreign foe, she was ever put forward to bear the brunt of the onset. Pity that she had never read a line of the "Lays ;" otherwise, on such occasions she might have quoted with a just pride,

And will ye dare to follow
If Astur clears the way ?

She had gotten on her Sabbath armour of sable silk, so stiff and unbending that it rather rattled than rustled ;

δούπησε δὲ τευχέ' ἐπ' αὐτῇ,

as she hastened upstairs, nothing loth ; and the light of battle was on her face when, without ceremony of knocking, she entered the bride's chamber.

It was a pleasant room enough, not quite spoiled even by the formal furniture ; and the out-look was about the best that Glencorquodale could boast. None of the easy-chairs were specially luxurious ; but by a cunning combination of

a couple of these Mariette had improvised a tolerably cozy couch right in the window-nook, whence, when tired of reading, she could command a broad stretch of the shimmering loch. Her heavy crape mourning had been replaced by a fresh white dressing-robe trimmed with black ribbons; and she looked thoroughly comfortable, certainly, but as little like kirk-going as the yellow-papered volume in her hand looked like a psalter. Luckily for Miss Clyde's health—for, whether stout or spare of habit, all this family were rather of an apoplectic turn—her dilating eyes did not realise this last enormity. But what they did see was scandal more than sufficient. Half a dozen swift strides brought her close to the offender.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Mrs. Leonard?" she said in a measured monotone, meant to be peculiarly impressive. "Or have you forgotten that you are *now*—suppose a vicious emphasis on the adverb—"a member of a Christian family, and that this is the Sabbath-day?"

Mariette closed her book quickly, and let it drop by her side out of sight—thus much she conceded to the spirit of the place—then she smiled up into the rugged face, tense with suppressed fury.

"My senses are much as they have always been, thank you. I do full justice to the Christianity of Glencorquodale; and I should think it was quite impossible—in Scotland—to forget the first day of the week. *Après?*"

The small bones in Rhoda's throat started out like harpsichord-keys; and she was forced to gulp down her passion twice before she could reply.

"I did not come here to argue; but to tell you that my father insists on your coming down instantly. I will wait for you; we shall be shamefully late, as it is."

Mariette crossed one slippered foot over the other, nestling further back into her chair with a shiver of lazy contentment.

"You didn't come here to argue? I'm so glad of that; it's quite tiring in this sultry weather. So Mr. Clyde insists, does he? It's rather a way you have in this family. Leonard was 'insisting' a few minutes ago; but, as you see, he did not prevail. I read our marriage contract over carefully, and I don't think kirk-going was in the bond. I

don't intend to stir out this morning ; so there is no necessity for your waiting. If you don't make haste, you really will be late."

In all her domestic bickerings, the stern Rhoda had never encountered anything like this contemptuous coolness ; and it so drove her beyond herself, that she gripped the other's wrist with no gentle clasp.

"You *shall* come down," she said, grinding her sharp teeth audibly.

You may remember that the shapeliness of Mariette's extremities was even less remarkable than their lithesome strength. She freed her wrist with no more effort than if baby fingers had been locked round it, and laughed insolently.

"You'd like to carry me down, I daresay ; but you mightn't find it quite so easy. Now, haven't we had about enough of heroics, and hadn't you better go down at once and report progress ? If my ways clash with the fashions here, I'm sorry for it ; but I don't mean to change them. Your father, of course, has a right to be master in his own house ; so, if my sin is past forgiveness, we will start for Ireland to-morrow."

As she spoke she smoothed daintily a slight ruffle of her sleeve ; and in her tawny eyes there was a challenge that the other shrank from palpably. Muttering to herself, the championess of Glencorquodale retreated out of that unholy presence, in a frame of mind not unlike that of the luckless exorcists who were trampled down of demoniacs.

The commotion downstairs was a very tempest in a teacup after all. There is always something servile about these petty despots, and discretion tempers their tyranny. Mr. Clyde was a notable illustration of this rule. At his place of business in Glasgow, he would bully clerks and subordinates to any extent ; and, five minutes afterwards on Change, would endure a coarse jest, or a rude speech, quite patiently. So now, with every advantage of his position, he forbore to take up the gage of battle. He did indeed, then and there, deliver a short discourse, in which "daughters of Heth," and "brands not to be snatched from the burning," were jumbled up somewhat confusedly. But afterwards he rather palliated Mariette's delinquency ; observing that "perhaps

it was rather soon after her father's funeral to expect her to appear in public." This door of escape could scarcely remain open up to the succeeding Sabbath; but by that time Leonard's wife had so thoroughly enfranchised herself, that even the austere Rhoda was fain to let her alone on her road to perdition.

Mariette did not attempt to profit by her victory, if it can be called so. Unquestionably, had she cared for it, she might have acquired no slight domination at Glencorquodale. Mr. Clyde's mind was precisely of the calibre most likely to be impressed by cool audacity. A blatant Republican and a *parvenu* to the very core—he was, of course, peculiarly accessible to patrician influences; the very freedom of manner, and daring disregard of conventionalities, which—in those days at least—would have shocked Belgravia, seemed to him only becoming in a Locksley of the Leasowes. Besides this, hard and selfish as he was, he had certain parental yearnings, and was shrewd enough to discern that, if they would but take the trouble, those skilful hands might mould his ne'er-do-well son into quite a presentable figure.

Mrs. Clyde, under her ludicrous affectations, kept a large motherly heart, and, beyond puffing, by way of protest, seldom took part in any domestic brawl. Leonard, the most troublesome of her children, was naturally her favourite; so her adhesion was easily secured.

Robert, the heir, had, from the first, been dazzled and bewildered by the brilliant stranger; for, somehow, about Mariette, even in her deep mourning, there was a *chic* hitherto unknown at Glencorquodale; and her assertion of independence on that Sabbath forenoon quite finished him. He would sit, for an hour together, blinking approvingly with his weak hazy eyes; and watching her as she moved hither and thither lithely, just as he might have watched some star of the ballet on the Glaswegian stage.

Rhoda Clyde had never been much drawn towards her sister-in-law, and only twice or thrice, under compulsion, as it were, had called her by her Christian name. After the discomfiture narrated above, she hated her as only rigid Presbyterians can hate. Yet she was cunning in her generation, and never ventured on overt hostility; only in her own mind constantly, and once or twice in conversation

with the obsequious minister, she delivered over this cast-away to Satan, with all the forms for such cases provided by Geneva.

Mariette, however, did not seem to care about extending or confirming her popularity. Round her husband, indeed, day by day, she drew her bonds closer and faster. Even here she did not follow the usual routine of feminine fascination—seldom stooping to conciliate, and always chary of her caresses; but the method, such as it was, was effectual. Before long, Leonard's feeble struggles for free agency had ceased, and a sullen fit was his nearest approach to revolt. However, the loss of moral dignity here had some counterbalance. In his drinking and smoking he certainly grew more temperate; and it was abundantly clear that he would have slept under any "bield," rather than have ventured into the wifely presence uncertain as to his "facings."

Thus Mariette's honeymoon passed placidly enough. Yet one thing troubled her. She noticed, or thought she noticed, occasionally, in her father-in-law a flurry quite distinct from his natural fidgetiness. Specially she had marked this on the days when he took holiday from business, and was expecting the post. On these days Robert Clyde, who was also in the house, invariably went down to Glasgow; but it was very evident that the senior partner had little confidence in his subordinate, and preferred himself supervising the trade correspondence.

Was it possible that the showy edifice was built upon sand after all, and that a storm was coming to test the foundations? And had she sold herself for fairy gold, that would turn to withered leaves and pebbles ere long? Intrepid as she was, she dared not face that doubt at the present, but thrust it violently aside—calling herself fool for such misgivings.

Nevertheless, she was not altogether sorry to escape from Glencorquodale, even with the prospect of remote country quarters before her.



CHAPTER XV.

BALLYNANE.



WHILE ago a travelled friend of mine, to whom few corners of this our earth are unknown, was asked what was the most depressing scene upon which his eyes had rested. After due consideration, he answered—"A small Irish country town, under 'soft' Irish weather."

Speaking from an experience inferior certainly to Dick Planet's, yet tolerably extensive, the subscriber can boldly endorse that opinion. You would suggest, perhaps, that an Irish bog might dispute the palm of dreariness; but, from an ordinary masculine point of view, the comparison would fail. In the latter case there would always be the chance, were it ever so faint, of gratifying what the caustic Frenchman affirmed was the Briton's first propensity—"to kill something." In the former case—save at exceptional seasons, such as an election or an agrarian riot—even this feeble satisfaction is impossible. The grey water trickles down the cold grey stones with a slow monotony unlike that of any other rain-drip; and the very ducks seem to quack despondently, instead of exultantly as elsewhere.

Such was the aspect of Ballynane when Mariette Clyde, on the morning after her arrival, looked forth from the windows of her lodgings, hard by the barrack gates. Leonard had gone up to the orderly-room; and though, as

a rule, she could dispense very easily with his attendance, more than once she caught herself wondering when he would return. She could be active enough both in mind and body on occasions ; but since her marriage her talents for housewifery had lain fallow, and she had resolved not to cumber herself with any needless domestic serving. So now, though it might have been some distraction to help her maid in the unpacking up-stairs and general "settling," she preferred to sit idle there, looking out at the rain. Vain repentances and late regrets were quite out of Mariette's line. Yet, truth to speak, the position for which she had schemed had never seemed so little worth the winning as on that forenoon. If the specimens she had already seen were fair samples of the corps, and if *tête-à-têtes* with Leonard were only to be diversified by talk-making for people of the Streatfield calibre, surely she were better back in Bohemia. Life at Fulmerstone—putting aside gayer Continental memories—was full of incident compared to this. There was always Pete Harradine to teaze, at all events ; and even her poor father's cynicisms and sarcasms were stimulants in their way. For once, Mariette indulged in a deep honest sigh.

It was when her musings were at the darkest that, glancing up, she discerned two figures turning the angle of the street from the barracks. Even at that short distance, they looked blurred and hazy in the mist ; but her husband's walk was unmistakable. Leonard's gait, half slouch, half swagger, was not to be reformed by setting-up drill. His companion was shorter by the head ; and, as he came nearer, his military cloak did not prevent Mariette from remarking his uprightness of carriage and squareness of build, and the brisk authoritative way in which his feet were planted on the pavement.

Leonard was rather reticent than communicative about his regiment as a rule ; nevertheless, he had twice or thrice dropped hints concerning a Major Griffiths ; from which it might have been inferred that there was no greater liking betwixt the two than usually subsists between a strict superior and a slack subaltern. Therefore Mariette—having first settled in her own mind that this must be he,—was somewhat surprised that such should be her first visitor. As the

two turned into the porch, her quick eye caught the glimmer of heel-spurs. She knew then that she had guessed correctly; and "turned out" her company-manners to receive the field-officer. A few seconds later, with much fluster and flurry on Leonard's part, and infinite self-possession on his wife's, the presentation took place.

A soldierly-looking person, beyond question, was the Major of the 120th; though his points were not likely to catch a lady's eye. Crisp dark hair, more than slightly grizzled; features not ill, though too sharply cut; shining black eyes, very restless and inquisitorial; that about makes up his *signalement*, the like of which you may count by scores at any fair or gathering in North Wales. The Major's least attractive attribute was his voice. It was not only curt and incisive in tone, but sometimes grated on the ear: and he had a way of compressing his lips suddenly at the end of a sentence, disagreeably suggestive of snapping. Nevertheless, he now evidently meant to be civil, after a rigid fashion, and his early visit had a kindly purpose.

The lodgings in which the Clydes were then installed—taken for them by Mr. Streatfield—had little or nothing to recommend them except the nearness of the barracks. One of the few inhabitants of Ballynane above burgess's degree, a prosperous mill-factor, had been forced by his wife's failing health to break up his establishment temporarily, and was open to an offer from any eligible tenant. His house, called Creggmore, was small, but comfortably contrived and furnished, and, in auctioneering language, "stood in its own grounds;" for a tolerably spacious paddock divided it from the public road, and in the garden at the rear, if there was not great wealth of fruits and flowers, there was abundance of shade. Altogether it was an opportunity, in the Major's opinion, not to be missed; and therewith Mariette fully coincided. She was very gracious in her acknowledgments, and seemed to think the additional distance from the barracks rather an advantage than otherwise.

"It will necessitate your walking at least a mile in every twenty-four hours, Leonard," she remarked; "so you ought not to grudge the additional rent. You can have no conception how laziness has grown upon him of late, Major Griffiths. He was supposed to be an invalid when our

acquaintance began ; but he was quite an athlete then, compared to what he is now. The very idea of a constitutional makes him look like a martyr : only I suppose the real martyr never used strong language."

The major smiled rather grimly. The marching-out season was then at the full ; and—being then left in command—he meant to try the effect of some sharp work in advance guards and skirmishing on that loose flaccid figure ; it was very evident the sufferer would meet with little compassion or sympathy, if he bemoaned himself afterwards at home. Fond and vain of his own opinion, he was somewhat gratified to find his estimate of Lieutenant Clyde so decisively endorsed.

"A shrewd sensible woman," he said to himself ; "and a gentlewoman too, I'll answer for it. I can quite believe what Streatfield told me about the father. If she married him with her eyes open, I suppose she deserves no pity ; but Ballynane—with *him*—looks very like penal servitude."

Following out this train of thought, he began a sort of apology for the dullness and deficiencies of the place.

"There is absolutely no neighbourhood, Mrs. Clyde. The great landowners are all absentees, and the smaller ones the merest squireens, who could not afford to be hospitable, even if they had the will. And the 120th has never been a marrying regiment since I can remember it. Very few of us could afford an establishment. The doctor and paymaster have brought their wives here ; but you will hardly care to see much of them."

He snuffed the air contemptuously as he ended ; and Mariette laughed a little, inwardly. She had resolved already to subjugate this man in authority ; and, if he had no other weakness, he would evidently be always assailable on the point of his Cymric pride. But there was no mirth in her voice, as she replied that "Ballynane seemed much what she had expected to find it, and that, if the society there had been ever so pleasant, whilst her loss was so recent, it would not tempt her."

She spoke quietly and sadly, glancing downwards at her crape sleeve ; and the major felt, for a moment, almost disconcerted, and began to frame in his own mind some excuse for his own intrusion. It seemed as though Mariette

had divined his thoughts; for, after a pause, she went on—

“I don’t call my husband’s comrades ‘society,’ you know, and I shall always be glad to see them when they have an hour to waste. If I can give them afternoon-tea in a pleasanter room than this, I shall not forget that I owe it to you, Major Griffiths, or that you came through the rain to do me the first good office. Small kindnesses help, quite as much as small gifts, to make friendships.”

She held out her hand as she spoke, half involuntarily as it seemed! and the weather-beaten martinet, more than half misogynist by nature and habit, felt his pulse quicken strangely, as the shapely fingers rested in his own. It was the awkwardness, perhaps, of a new sensation that made him close his visit rather abruptly; for, after muttering a hasty proffer of any further services that might be required, he took his leave.

A quicker observer than Leonard Clyde might have been puzzled to decipher Mariette’s smile, as from the window, she watched the square sturdy figure gradually swallowed up in the sullen mist.





CHAPTER XVI.

LIFE AT BALLYNANE.

IN the good little books more in fashion twenty years ago than now-a-days, whose object was to blend amusement with instruction, and strew the path of learning with flowers, not an unfrequent incident is some outdoor project thwarted by inclement weather. On such emergencies, when the model children had begun to fret, if not to murmur, you must remember how triumphantly the model mother comes to the front,—improving the occasion after the manner of the immortal Barlow. Each article of upholstery, no matter how homely or innocent, is forced to contribute its quota to the entertainment fund. The ivory is traced to the jungle, the iron to the mine, the leather and wool to their native pastures; and the happy family gradually get so interested in the analysis, as to profess rather regret than exultation when the weather unexpectedly clears.

Some such talent of extracting amusement from unpromising materials had been granted to Mariette Clyde; only her pieces of furniture were in flesh and blood, moving and speaking occasionally, if they did not think.

The 120th was hardly a favourable specimen of a marching regiment. It seemed to be out of luck in all ways—even fighting luck. Recalled from India just before the Afghan troubles began, since then it had been shifted from

one home station to another, each duller than the last, till the climax of dreariness was reached at Ballynane. It was an impecunious corps, no doubt; but if good fellowship and poverty do not often go hand in hand, and if "cakes and ale" could not be provided without great cost, how would it have fared with the thousands of jovial warriors who

Have lived on their pay,
And spent half-a-crown out of sixpence a day?

Both the colonel—then absent on sick leave—and his second in command were strict disciplinarians; but not a whit stricter than many whose "boys" are as merry as crickets when they are once off parade; and there was really no substantial reason why the officers of the 120th should have taken their pleasure so sadly and sluggishly. That they did so was beyond question—captains and subalterns alike. Only three companies were with head-quarters, the residue being scattered on detachment duty. There was fair wild shooting within easy reach of Ballynane; but only one or two availed themselves of it in a lazy, desultory way. The rest, when the day's duty was done, might usually be found in or about the ante-room, smoking moodily; or pretending to play pool on an antique billiard-table with flaccid cushions and a perfect "suck" into one corner pocket. Major Griffiths was decidedly active in habit, and took regular exercise either on horse or foot; but, as he almost invariably walked and rode alone, his example did not go far towards energising his fellows. There was steady but, except in one or two instances, not deep drinking, after mess; then smoke, and more smoke, and shilling whist, played "anyhow," brought the heavy day to its close.

The most trivial incident would have been considered eventful in the dead monotony of barrack life at Ballynane, and Mariette Clyde's appearance naturally caused no small stir there. Her fame had to a certain extent preceded her—but his comrades placed no great reliance on Lieutenant Streatfield's judgment; and those who gave the matter a second thought believed that he had exaggerated the attractions of the bride, whom possibly he had contemplated

through a vinous mist. Furthermore they were impressed by the exceeding unlikelihood of "Calico's" drawing a prize in any matrimonial lottery, howsoever liberal. If a fairy queen, in correct extravaganza costume, had sprung up in the centre of the ante-room, these honest fellows could hardly have been more startled and surprised, than when they realised what manner of woman the butt of the regiment had wooed and wedded.

The rawest ensign had—or supposed himself to have—certain feminine experiences ; and with the small tricks and temptations of the garrison flirt some of the elders were tolerably familiar ; but Mariette differed from any of the fast damsels, or frisky matrons, that they had yet encountered. She was frank and free of speech, to the verge of audacity, and never seemed to trouble herself to make talk for her visitors ; but, somehow, men, whose conversational efforts in female society had rarely risen above the question-and-answer stage, found themselves waxing fluent, and departed with the pleasing conviction that "they had found someone who understood them at last." The foreign tinge of her manner, and occasional foreign turn of her expressions, made even commonplaces sound *piquant* ; and sometimes her lightest words seemed to carry a subtle meaning, of which, of course, only her immediate listener supposed himself to be aware. She never stood on her dignity, or kept anyone at arms' length. But, behind all her *bonne camaraderie*, there was a haughty self-reliance which became her well ; and the man must have been very dull of wit, or utterly blinded by vanity, who would not soon have divined that Leonard Clyde's wife would hold her own against any assailant till it should please her to drop her guard.

Such as she was, within a week of her arrival Mariette's triumph was complete. Major Griffiths—taciturn and reserved, as usual—kept his opinion entirely to himself ; but that it was not unfavourable might be presumed from the frequency of his visits, and the ingenuity of his pretexts for rendering them. The residue of the 120th were evidently enthralled to a man. Lieutenant Streatfield took to himself almost as much credit as if he had been bridegroom, instead of groomsman, and gave himself all the airs of an old

acquaintance—constantly endeavouring to draw out Mrs. Clyde on the subject of Fulmerstone and its neighbourhood : one would have thought he had known and lived in the place from his infancy, whereas he had sojourned in it for barely twenty hours. Even the hard-bitten Scotch surgeon did not wholly escape the contagious enthusiasm ; and took his douce little wife sharply to task for want of charity, when she ventured to suggest that “Mrs. Clyde was rather free and off-hand in her ways.”

A great change came over barrack life at Ballynane. The only loungers in the ante-room, now, of an afternoon, were luckless subalterns, over whom adjutant's drills were impending ; and the battered billiard-table had respite for awhile. Men who a week ago were too lazy to put on mufti, arrayed themselves now in their neatest shooting suits and strolled out past the gates of Creggmore, or along the road that Mrs. Clyde most affected for her constitutional. Mariette carried out this custom of hers almost independently of weather, and quite independently of her husband. If Leonard was free, and willing to accompany her, it was well ; if otherwise, it was perhaps a shade better. But, if she sallied forth alone, she almost invariably returned under escort, more or less strong according to circumstances. By five o'clock or so she was always at home again ; and, very soon, “tea” at Creggmore became a regimental institution.

Whether his wife's popularity was a pleasure or a vexation to Leonard Clyde, would not have been easy to determine. At home, or under Mariette's eye, he did not often behave himself unseemly ; but, abroad, he certainly waxed day by day more snappish and overbearing. This, however, is the fashion of his kind when suddenly exalted ; and that Leonard had got a social step was beyond question.

Captain Barrington, for instance, commander of his company, who hitherto, except when on duty, usually ignored his existence, now always greeted him familiarly when they met on parade, and once—this centurion was of a mild sporting turn—actually consulted Clyde as to the investment of two “fivers” in the autumn handicaps ; and the latter, who had not even read the list of acceptances, laid down the law with infinite assurance and gravity. Others, too, who had been wont to divert themselves with exasperating his Allen

temper, began to jest with him in much more kindly fashion ; and accepted his somewhat coarse retorts with much outward good humour. On the whole, he had now no reason to complain of his comrades.

Nevertheless, Leonard's satisfaction—if he felt any—must necessarily have been mixed with much alloy. Even to his shallow wit and abundant self-conceit, it must have been evident that he was basking only in reflected sunshine.

Under the like circumstances, men infinitely wiser and larger of heart have not always borne themselves generously. Often enough, if the whole truth were known, seeds of discord, ripening into bitter fruit, have been sown in happy households, simply because the wife, in the loving wish to enlighten his labour, would set her hand to the plough, behind which her husband was toiling, and drove it more deftly. Specially in literature this might have been noted : indeed, if I remember right, a clever story, of late, was devoted almost entirely to illustrating this theme.

Leonard Clyde's jealousies were, of course, of a vulgar and trivial kind. Nevertheless, they smouldered none the less sullenly ; and if Mariette's behaviour had been more conciliatory, the vague sense of injury would probably have still ever abode with him ; so domestic amity could not long have endured at Cregmore.

Her own estimate of her surroundings was perhaps expressed fairly enough in a letter indited about this period. It should be premised that correspondence was by no means Mariette's strong point. Indeed, few damsels, *bene natæ et moderatè doctæ*, could have had less practice with the pen. She had never had the chance, as you know, of forming any friendships ; and she was of far too practical a turn to waste time on chance acquaintances, with whom, in all probability, as with herself it was a case of "out of sight out of mind." When she did put pen to paper, her style much resembled her writing—bold, free, and fluent, but not specially feminine or graceful. However, this special epistle, *quantum valet*, shall partly be transcribed.

"I have heard you grumbling for the last fortnight, you poor old Pete, just as plainly as if I had been standing behind your shoulder. Well—how would you get on without a grievance ? A little mild swearing is good for your body if

not for your soul. But when one hates writing, as I do, it's only natural to wait till there's something to say. And it is a very little "something," even now. I wonder if in all your goings to and fro, or horse-hunting, you have lighted on such a place as this? Do you remember Dummerstadt, where we went to vegetate after our disastrous campaign at Wiesbaden? That retreat was debauched and festive, compared to Ballynane. As for Fulmerstone, I'm ashamed of ever having been bored there. That there is no neighbourhood it is needless to say; for every one who can afford society, can afford to migrate, and, of course, has done so long ago. The climate, at first sight, seems a little damp. This is their dry season, I believe; and, in the last three weeks we have had three days without rainfall. As for our house—we are grand, you see—it is thoroughly commodious and thoroughly uncomfortable; without a nook or corner anywhere, and everything, down to the smallest *fautuil*, strictly straight and square. If you saw my drawing-room—knowing how I like to be cozy—you would not wonder, as people here do, at my constitutional without respect to weather.

"Now, as to the 'live stock' at Ballynane. There are only three companies with the head-quarters here, I'm thankful to say. With the whole regiment to the fore, one would be simply smothered—morally, strictly morally speaking of course. When the *Padre* used to sneer at the Line I never heeded it; but, if the 120th is a fair sample (which I don't in the least believe), he was unusually charitable, poor dear. We thought Mr. Streatfield shy and stupid, you remember; here, he sometimes is quite dazzling by comparison. By far the best of them is Major Griffiths, commanding in the Colonel's absence. I don't despair of *him*; for he can talk sensibly and shrewdly enough, in a short snappish way. As for the others, Pete, they literally know—nothing. There is a Captain Barrington, for instance, the sporting authority of the regiment, who was quite startled the other day at discovering that winning the Leger entailed a penalty—and so on with the rest. Before I had arrived they had one and all, I believe—always excepting my Major—taken to 'drinking ratafia,' without Captain Smith's excuse; for I doubt any of them being troubled with *that* kind of remorse. Now—they have one and all 'aken to worshipping me. Whether

the change of stimulants will be beneficial remains to be seen. One of the subalterns, however, sounds more promising. Isn't Clare Archbold a pretty name? He was in the Guards for two years; and, when all his own money was spent, he was put here, *en pénitence* by a stern uncle from whom he has expectations. I think he must be rather nice—the others are so shy in speaking of him; and Leonard always swears to himself if the name is even mentioned. I shall know more soon; for Mr. Archbold returns this week from a month's leave 'on urgent private affairs.' About our domesticities there is literally nothing to tell. I took my husband for better or for worse; and really he seems neither better nor worse than I took him for; and I am quite as independent as I care to be. You can judge of all this for yourself, whenever you please; there is room for you here, and to spare. But I like you too well, Pete, to *ask* you to Ballynane. Besides, you have business on hand, I guess, for the next six weeks or so."

The rest of the letter, relating to financial matters, may as well be omitted. It was addressed to Peter Harradine Poste Restante Baden-Baden.





CHAPTER XVII.

MARIETTE AND THE MAJOR'S HORSE.

PUTTING competitive incitements entirely aside soldiering, now-a-days, is surely a much more serious business than it was a quarter of a century ago. During the long lethargy betwixt Waterloo and Alma, warlike minds, no less than warlike blades, naturally grew a little rusty; and that a certain slackness permeated our military system will scarcely be denied. Yet, to the rule of taking things easy, there were always exceptions not a few. Of these last Major Evan Griffiths was a notable example.

Fond and proud of his profession, he had worked up its minutest details with a patient pertinacity very rare in those days, when merit was a lever less powerful than interest at the War Office. He carried discipline to the verge of severity; but the veriest grumbler was fain to allow that he spared himself no more than he spared his subordinates; and not in military matters alone he had proved himself strictly and sternly conscientious. A Tory to the backbone, and a zealous upholder of all ancient institutions, he nevertheless reminded you of those doughty fanatics who drew swords for a broken Covenant; and, with more than his share of aristocratic *morgue*—above all earthly possessions he valued his family-tree—he was endowed with more than one republican virtue. He was anything but a pious person, in the usual sense of the word. When with his regiment, he

attended church as a consequence of church parade, and listened to the chaplain gravely and attentively, as he would have listened to the reading out of any superior orders; but no discourse yet uttered for his behoof had struck a chord of devotion or contrition in Evan Griffith's breast; and when on leave, he rarely entered a place of public worship. His parents—long since deceased—had brought him up in the practice of their own gloomy religion; and though he had no grateful memories of that early training, the traces of it abode with him still. He had a creed of his own, which he followed implicitly; though it was probably in accordance with no recognised formula of faith. In the matters of temperance and chastity he was a very ascetic; and, considering his fiery temper and professional temptations, he offended against the First Commandment rarely; but, when he *did* swear, the words sounded less like voluntary blasphemy than a deliberate curse. He was as brave as steel; and the heaviest cross of his life was his enforced idleness during the Indian and African campaigns—he had not interest enough to obtain any staff appointment; and, besides his disinclination to leave the corps in which he had obtained his first commission, an exchange would have been too costly for his modest means.

Few, who knew the man well, could help respecting him after a fashion; but fewer still really liked or admired him. To begin with, he was essentially narrow minded, and prejudiced even to bitterness: though himself absurdly irritable and sensitive on certain points, he was seldom careful to spare other people's feelings; and for the small venial weaknesses of humanity he seemed to have no indulgence whatever. Such a personage was not likely to be a favourite with either sex; and you may guess, perhaps, with which he was most unpopular. Many women will salute the *façes*, but few will submit tamely to the *ferula*; and it must be owned that there was something pedagogic in the Major's assumptions of authority, and something petty in his attempts at tyranny. If, as was aforesaid, he was more than half a misogynist, the objects of his aversion assuredly repaid him in kind.

If we hold to the Church as by law established, we must

needs believe that the age of miracles is past ; yet, perchance, wonders are being wrought among us daily that, were they palpable and visible, would baffle human intelligence not less than the portent which startled the Gadarenes. And amongst these might be reckoned certain strange proclivities.

If any person, familiar with the two characters, had been asked to select the woman least likely to attract Evan Griffiths, he probably would have pointed to Mariette Clyde. The old paradox of "extremes meeting" could not apply here ; for there were points of similarity sufficient to have held them apart. If the one was dictatorial and somewhat overbearing, the other was audaciously independent and self-willed—quite as bent on taking her own line, and having her own way, as if from youth upwards she had been a leader of men. She was always perfectly courteous to the Major, and evidently preferred his society to any other that Ballynane had thus far afforded her ; but her welcome was never more than cordial, and in her manner there was not a trace of deference, much less of flattery or cajolement.

Of all this Evan Griffiths was thoroughly aware. Nevertheless, not a day passed that he did not find himself once, at least, at Creggmore ; and he soon ceased to invent excuses for these visits, which Mariette, on her part, seemed to take as a matter of course. Soon, too, he was fain to realise that the presence of others there rather interfered with than assisted conversation. It might have been supposed that he stood on his dignity ; for, though less punctilious and reserved with his comrades than with civilians, the Major did not forget distinctions of regimental rank even off parade. But, in point of fact, whether the third who spoiled his *tête-à-tête* was a staid silent captain almost of his own standing, or a pert loquacious ensign, mattered little. He began to cast about for some plan, whereby he might engross to himself more of Mariette's time and attention without provoking comment or ridicule ; for he could hardly put the visiting hours at Creggmore into the order-book, or place a sentry over the premises. Before very long, such a chance presented itself.

Major Griffiths did not hunt often—indeed, had he been

ever so fond of it, his means would not have permitted of regular pursuit—but he could ride fairly straight to hounds on occasion, and was a really good judge of horseflesh: a lucky deal often had helped to eke out his slender income. For some time past he had had in his eye a certain five-year old, owned by a neighbouring farmer—a low wiry brown, with plenty of length, and good manners to boot. There was no hunting worth the name within reach; but, for that very reason, the mare might be had on comparatively easy terms. A true Welshman rarely “rushes” at any bait in the shape of a bargain; so the prudent field-officer had only half made up his mind to the plunge, when, one day in his hearing, Mrs. Clyde chanced to mention her own fondness for saddle exercise. The words were spoken honestly, and without intention; for Mariette had no idea that anything likely to carry her could be found in or near Ballynane.

On the following day the brown mare shifted her quarters from Mike Doolan’s farmstead to the Major’s stable, and, that same evening, the latter surprised Lieutenant Clyde not a little by proposing to walk home with him after mess. Leonard dined tolerably often in barracks now. Since his comrades had taken him into favour, he found it pleasanter than in old days: and, though the mess-man of the 120th was a moderate artist, his efforts contrasted favourably with those of the Irish slattern at Creggmore. The Lieutenant would have been infinitely more surprised, could he have divined what was passing in his superior’s mind as the two strolled on through the moonlight.

The Major felt towards his subalterns much as a strict schoolmaster may feel towards his monitors; they were invested with a certain authority, no doubt, but one entirely subordinate to and distinct from his own. From the moment of his joining, he had disliked Clyde; regarding him as a sample of the class which was his own special aversion—those “who made a convenience of the service.” Leonard’s subsequent conduct had not altered those first impressions; indeed amongst the Queen’s numerous bad bargains it would have been difficult to find a slacker soldier. His application for sick leave some months ago, though really reasonable, the Major regarded as a plain case of “malingering;” and Leonard’s matrimonial venture, when

it first reached his ears, was reckoned as a fresh offence. He had resolved to keep the shirker well up to his collar whenever the latter should return to his duty; and, thus far, had carried out these benevolent intentions fully.

And now, as they walked on side by side, with ineffable wrath and self-contempt the proud Welshman confessed to himself a certain timidity and embarrassment in the other's presence, like that of one about to ask a favour that he can scarce hope to be granted. However, to the purport of his visit he made no allusion on the way; only his usual brisk pace was slackened to a saunter, and at the gate of Creggmore he halted for quite two minutes, still talking on indifferent subjects, as if doubting whether he would enter or no. Though Leonard's invitation was not over cordial, you may guess which way the doubt turned.

That Mariette could have counted on receiving any visitors that evening, was manifestly impossible; but she was one of those whom no accident or emergency of life, whether great or small, ever seems to take unawares. She rather encouraged Leonard's dining at mess; and, perhaps, her coziest hour in the twenty-four was when she settled down into their only comfortable arm-chair, with a volume of Balzac, or Georges Sand, at her elbow, to read or ruminate as should please her. But, on these occasions, she bestowed just as much time and care on her toilet as if she had been going into ordinary society. To many people she would have seemed less attractive in fanciful colours, than in the plain black *moirè*, fitting without a wrinkle, just sufficiently lighted up by the narrow bead-trimming; and an elaborate wreath might have been less becoming than the single white flower set in her rich russet tresses.

She was reading when the door opened, and never lifted or turned her head till Leonard spoke.

"The Major's walked home with me," he said, slowly and sulkily.

It was not that he considered the visit inconvenient or ill-timed; but he bore a chronic grudge against his superior, as the present fountain-head of the authority, and dispenser of the duties, which were so irksome to him.

Mariette started quickly to her feet: in her strong vitality there was no room for languid grace; yet in her swiftest

movement you would scarcely have detected a shade of *brusquerie*.

"How good of you to come down, Major Griffiths. I was nearly asleep over my book; and I can see by your face that you've something amusing to tell me."

The other's cheek flushed a little; and the flush grew darker under the warm pressure of her fingers, whilst the same thrill shot through his pulse, only tenfold stronger, as when their hands met for the very first time.

And yet this man was not warned. After all, why should he have been wiser and more provident than the myriads of sages, warriors, schoolmen, and statesmen who have walked open-eyed down the same broad smooth highway, and gone down alive into the pit?

"Nothing amusing, Mrs. Clyde," the Major answered, in a voice rather harder than usual, "but something useful perhaps; or I should scarcely have ventured here."

Then, in his deliberate, methodical way, he explained how a mount was always now at Mrs. Clyde's service; proffering himself as escort, 'that is, if Clyde was not afraid to trust him.'

Those last words were uttered with a manifest hesitation; and, once more, the speaker's irritable Welsh blood grew hot with shame.

Afflicted with divers marital defects, from the inconvenience of jealousy, at least, Leonard was thus far quiet free. Besides, he had so thoroughly fallen into the habit of allowing Mariette to have her own way, that it would have been difficult now to tighten the reins, unless under strong provocation. He had no serious objection to make; nevertheless, he paused as if in doubt. Natures like his always find satisfaction in sitting in the seat of arbitrament, for a space ever so brief, on matters ever so trivial. He might have dallied yet longer, if a glance from Mariette, half imperious, half contemptuous, and a quick shrug of her shoulders, had not warned him that delay was dangerous. So, in good set terms, and with the best grace he could assume, he expressed gratitude for the Major's offer, and implicit confidence in the other's *chaperonage*.

But Mariette was much more voluble in her thanks; and, perhaps for the first time since they became acquainted,

Griffiths saw her eyes flash with keen natural pleasure. There was no acting or affectation here. She was honestly fond of the saddle, though perhaps conscious of looking her very best there; and even Arthur Locksley had occasionally loosened his purse-strings, without grumbling, to indulge this taste of Mariette's. The very brightest square in her chequered life was a three months' sojourn in a Hungarian castle, whither the whole party had been invited by a grateful Magyar, in whose colours Harradine had pulled off a good race out of the fire at Pesth. That was years ago; but she remembered it as if it had all happened yesterday—those rousing gallops over the vast plain bounded only by the Carpathians—Pete's gruff voice dropping every now and then a word of caution or schooling, as they stretched on side by side—the shake of the head of the Count's old Jager, the reproach whereof was utterly annulled by his admiring grin, when he lifted her from the back of a half-broken colt, mired and flecked with foam.

She nearly got into disgrace by laughing outright, when the major inquired if she would venture to prove his new purchase the following forenoon, providing that Norah was exercised in a skirt throughout the morning.

To say nothing of those Hungarian exploits, had she not once changed saddles with Gustave de Grantmesnil, when that ambitious but unlucky *gandin* was unseated and disabled, and ridden home his fretful Limousin through the darkling bye-ways of the Schwartz-wald? And had it come to this, that an inoffensive creature, warranted free from vice (thus much the major had averred), was to be "gentled" for her behoof, by the hard heavy hands of a bätman-groom? Not if Mariette knew it. However, she kept her countenance to admiration; only remarking demurely, that she was not at all nervous, and would prefer being the first to try the skirt on Norah.

"I should like to have all the credit, you see," she went on, with her saucy smile; "especially as, if she has been on sale, the experiment has probably been made more than once already."

So, after a little demur on the major's part, all was settled.

There was luckily no difficulty about the side saddle;

for, though his wife seldom or ever used it, this article formed part of the surgeon's baggage.

In the orderly-room next day Major Griffiths was fidgety, even beyond his wont; yet his mood seemed to lean rather towards mercy than severity, and some half-dozen defaulters got off more easily than they had expected. Having got through his duties, he dressed for riding with unusual care, and rendered himself at Creggmore rather before the appointed hour. The bätman-groom aforesaid followed, leading Norah; for reasons good the major would not allow her to be mounted.

Mariette and her husband were standing on the door-steps; and, though Griffiths was not gifted with an artistic eye, he was infinitely struck by the picture. The loose clownish proportions of the one figure only brought out more strongly the lithesome grace of the other; and, certainly, any costume in which Mariette had hitherto appeared could not compare, in point of effect, with that which she now wore. Not a scrap of colour, beyond the narrow white collar-rim, relieved the sombre hue of her riding-dress; even her gauntlet-gloves were black. Nevertheless, the strange sparkle about her might have been noticed by the most indifferent spectator. If the day had been dull and murky, instead of bright and breezy for a wonder, the effect would have been precisely the same. The habit of stout blue cloth, so dark as to be almost "invisible," fitted her simply to perfection—it was Pete Harradine's last and crowning extravagance, as they passed through town on their way to Fulmerstone, and it had never been hanselled yet. The hat—rather lower in the crown than they were then worn—sat upon the close-braided tresses as if it had been moulded there; and, from under the lifted skirt, peeped as neat a riding-boot as ever was fashioned in polished leather.

Evan Griffiths, approaching at a walk designedly slow, would fain have halted altogether to contemplate the picture at his ease; but, as you may guess, he refrained himself. Only, as he swung himself out of the saddle and exchanged the usual greetings, that dark flush of his cheek was more noticeable than ever, and lasted longer.

"Let me make friends with Norah before I mount,"

Mariette said : " that's more than half the battle. Not that there will be any battle, I am sure."

She stepped lightly forward as she spoke, and began to stroke the mare's neck, and laid her cheek against the tawny muzzle; whispering all the while in low cooing tones, such as no human creature had as yet won from those saucy lips. Either hand or voice, or both, seemed to act magnetically; for Norah whinnied with pleasure; and, instead of shrinking from the stranger, nestled closer to her shoulder, as if courting the caress.

It was a pretty sight certainly, and even Leonard Clyde recognised this; for his heavy features lighted up with a sort of pride of proprietorship, as he muttered—

"She can coax 'em, Major: can't she?"

The other did not answer; indeed, he was watching so intently, that it is doubtful if he was aware of being addressed. Turning round quickly, Mariette, just for one second, met that fixed gaze, and smiled to herself triumphantly.

"We'll start whenever you choose, Major Griffiths. It's a sin to waste a minute of this phenomenal day. No, thanks," she went on, anticipating his offer of assistance; "I think I can mount best by myself—or almost by myself—if you will stand on the off-side, in case Norah's head swerves. Come nearer, Leonard, and stand steady—so."

Grasping the reins and the pommel with her right hand, and apparently only just touching her husband's shoulder with her left, she swung herself upwards, and instantly sat saddle-fast. Pete Harradine had taught her the trick long ago—a simple one enough, but it requires neat doing. The mare did swerve violently, almost upsetting the field-officer, and with a rearing plunge wrenched herself fairly loose. Yet Mariette, though her foot had not touched the stirrup, never wavered—scarcely swayed, indeed—and, gathering up the reins lightly, leaned forward over Norah's neck; murmuring to her in those same low coaxing tones. There was no malignant spirit to be exorcised; nevertheless, the rapid action of the charm was marvellous. In less than two minutes the mare stood almost quiet; only pawing the ground occasionally, more in play than in fright, and wincing a little as the skirt brushed her flank.

Under any other circumstances Griffiths would have waxed exceeding wroth ; for he was not used to be roughly entreated, either by man or beast ; and it is difficult, even for a field-officer, to look dignified, whilst staggering backwards, and clutching at the air to save himself from falling. But, now, he utterly forgot his discomfiture, whilst he followed each movement of horse and rider with eager eyes. Certainly, the latter's skill and courage did deserve some praise ; and one, at least, of the spectators was only too ready to render it. But, for the very life of him, the major could not just then put the compliment into words, and only muttered something unintelligible, as he walked up to the horse that his groom was holding, and himself got to saddle. Mariette was too good a judge to fret the mare by keeping her standing a moment longer than was necessary ; and she was already walking on gently, letting Norah play with her bit. But her escort soon overtook her.

With the same self-satisfied smirk still on his face, Leonard Clyde watched the pair till they vanished round the turn of the road.





CHAPTER XVIII.

A RIDE WITH THE MAJOR.

NOWHERE is it so difficult to guard a secret as in a place like Ballynane, where the simplest incidents loom large, like objects seen through a mist. The major had kept his own counsel, rather from natural reserve than because he was conscious of any reason for mystery; and though the Scotch surgeon, when he lent the side-saddle, was shrewd enough to draw his own conclusions, he was canny enough to keep the same to himself. To ignore his neighbour's affairs had long been his principle, and he had found it useful at times. But in dull country quarters even bätmen wax garrulous, and their masters—under other circumstances, perhaps, little prone to gossip—are afflicted with a morbid eagerness “to see or hear some new thing.” So it befell that, before morning parade, nearly everyone in barracks was aware that the major's new purchase was to be tried that afternoon; and during the few minutes of leisure, preceding the sounding of the officers' call, Lieutenant Clyde formed the centre of a group, all anxious to learn the likeliest direction of the ride.

Leonard, however, with the best intentions, could not satisfy his comrades—averring, with much simplicity, that it was scarcely probable he himself would have much voice in the matter; and, as none ventured to sound the major

concerning his intentions, the inquirers were fain to chance it.

Whether Griffiths divined all this curiosity, and felt a saturnine satisfaction in baulking the same, is doubtful. But, certainly, had such been his deliberate purpose, he could scarcely have acted otherwise. Instead of returning through the street, or following the main road leading countrywards from Creggmore, almost immediately after issuing from the gate, he proposed turning down an unfrequented bye lane; alleging that this was the shortest cut to a range of low hills, along the crown of which they were likely to find some sound cantering-ground.

Mariette herself, like most fair women conscious of looking their very best, would perhaps have preferred passing in review before two or three spectators at least. But, being in high good humour, she did not contest the point: only, by the covert smile flickering round her lip, you might have divined she had some slight inkling of her companion's motives, and was not a little amused thereby. So the pair rode on very amicably—rather silently, however; for, under the strongest provocation, Griffiths could not be conversational, and Mariette was too much taken up with getting Norah well into her hand to make talk.

The fact of their being engaged in rather an unconventional proceeding, never struck either of these two. Though he had knocked about the world as much as his fellows, and had shut neither his eyes nor ears to what was going on around him, the major had mixed singularly little in "society," in the popular sense of the word; and, having led a very regular, if not a wholly blameless life, had never yet been indicted before that terrible jury which sits permanently, with Dame Grundy as its forewoman. If he had been asked over-night, in so many words, whether it became a man of his age and station to tempt Leonard Clyde's young wife—Leonard Clyde being such a one as he was—to risk her matronly credit merely to indulge her fancy for horse exercise, that he would have turned on the questioner in great wrath and dudgeon is certain. Nevertheless, it is next to certain that he would then have forborne. The precise age at which a man becomes a safe and unimpeachable *chaperon* has never yet, I believe, been defined

—indeed, considering the manner in which certain elders have lately comported and disported themselves, the boundary line would be rather hard to draw. But that Evan Griffiths had not attained it, must to any unprejudiced judge have been manifest. Not less patent, too, one would have thought, was the fact that the “gay ladye” under his escort, neither on the score of years, gravity, nor homeliness, could claim immunity from censure. However, it may safely be affirmed that neither self-reproach nor misgiving troubled Evan Griffiths—riding on through the bright breezy weather, with a lightness of heart very strange and new to him. For he was prone to look rather on the seamy side of life’s web; and though he had never known any serious sorrow, in his days heretofore there had been less of light than shade.

With Mariette it was different. She could not plead ignorance of the Grundeian code; for, in the course of her self-education she had gotten all its main clauses, prohibitive and admonitory, by heart, and had learned also to set them all at nought. A Bohemian born and bred—in Bohemia she was minded to live and die; and, even had she been more happily mated, it would have been easier to make a decent burgess out of a Count of the Calès, than a staid matron out of Arthur Locksley’s daughter. Yet in all that recklessness and audacity there was less peril than might have seemed. At an age when children, more carefully nurtured, are scarce allowed to dip their feet in the spray of the world’s ocean, it had fared with her as with those water-babies of the Marquesas who, on a slip of plank, glide from crest to crest of the huge Pacific rollers. She was not likely now to be affrighted by any humour of the deep sea; and, blew the wind foul or fair, the hand on the helm was safe to be cool and steady.

This sketch—such as it is—is not meant to be of the “Hell Breughel” school; and it is best not to overcharge the sombre colours. If her stability be rather a matter of temperament than of principle, it is, perhaps, no high praise to predicate of any woman that she is free from womanhood’s chief weakness. It is needful, however, you should understand that to one temptation at least Mariette Clyde was never likely to succumb. There was no more of sensuous-

ness than of sentiment in her composition ; and though she might rise greedily enough at any other of the devil's baits, for her the mere lust of the eye had little allurements. Well : after all is said and done, Machiavelli—even *sous cotte*—is less despicable than Messalina. She loved to conquer men, partly because it gratified her vanity, partly because she looked on each and every man as a possible instrument toward some desired end. But with the combinations of her head, it, thus far, seemed improbable that her heart would ever interfere. In playing one perilous game she had this incalculable advantage—to her the stakes were merely nominal, whilst to her opponent they might be a matter of life and death. She had smiled to herself triumphantly, as you have seen, at each successive sign of Evan Griffiths' growing infatuation ; but of any guilty intent, or even of any serious designs against his peace, she was honestly clear.

So, this afternoon, Mariette, no more than her companion, was cumbered with regrets or misgivings. There was a blithesome sky overhead, and a good horse under her ; and she savoured the present satisfaction freely, bidding the future take thought for itself.

Norah, though she showed no actual temper, was still fidgety and nervous, and, when set fairly going, required nice handling. Till they slackened pace to a walk again on coming to a rising ground, only desultory remarks were exchanged. There, Mariette “served” the first ball.

“This is a holiday in more ways than one. No one will expect tea at Creggmore this afternoon : *that* is a comfort. I shouldn't like to say anything mutinous, Major Griffiths ; but has it never struck you that there is a little—just a little—sameness about the conversation of your brother officers?”

He broke into a short laugh. Setting aside the pleasure that our fallen nature always feels at hearing our friends depreciated, he was gratified at once more finding here an echo of his own opinion. Not naturally clever, but possessed of a retentive memory, his reading had taken a scope very unusual in those days, when studious soldiers were rare birds indeed. His intellectual estimate of his comrades was proportionally low.

“You must find it uphill work, Mrs. Clyde. But what

would you have? The *Times*—leaders omitted; the last sensation novel; a magazine or two; that's the British subaltern's literary diet, and I doubt if our tastes improve with length of service. No wonder our conversation-capital is limited."

Her eyes shot out a swift side-glance, saucily scornful.

"That 'we' was rather cunningly put in; but I'm not to be trapped. You know quite well I made a distinction when I spoke. I think you can *causer* very much to the purpose, when you take the trouble. But surely the others might find *something* to talk about, besides the weather and the crops. Picking a story to pieces would be better than nothing; but Mr. Streatfield—your great novel reader I believe—always confuses the plots of 'Barnaby Rudge' and 'Vanity Fair.' It's almost as absurd as when Captain Barrington tries to talk racing. *Enfin, ç'a m'agace.*"

Albeit inwardly exulting, possibly for form's sake the major would have put in some other demurrer of judgment on behalf of his corps; but the thread of talk was broken by their being forced to ride in single file over a bad bit of road. When they were side by side again, said Mariette—

"Now, will you tell me what this Mr. Archbold is like, who is expected back to-morrow or next day? My husband can't endure him, I know; but that's nothing. Leonard's sympathies—if he has any—and antipathies, are so perfectly irrational. But the odd thing is, that I can get this character from *nobody*. That is why I'm rather curious on the subject. If he is generally disliked, there must be some cause."

The other knit his brows sharply. Plainly, the question was distasteful to him. But it was also evident that it caused him some doubt and perplexity. Despite his prejudices, he was a just person in the main, willing to render to every man his due, whether of good or evil. Yet he could not bring himself to answer now quite honestly.

"Archbold is certainly not a favourite," he said, after a pause; "and that is not wonderful, perhaps, all things considered. He is the quietest person imaginable, both in speech and manner; but there's such a thing as quiet insolence. Service in the Guards is very different from service in the Line, of course; and Ballynane must be a great contrast to Windsor. Still, the place is not quite a

penal settlement; and the officers of the 120th, with all their deficiencies, are a little better than prison-warders. Now, I do believe, it is just in this light that Archbold regards his present quarters and his present comrades. Only the night before he left, he was asked how long he should be absent; and he answered, in his mild, melancholy way—"My ticket-of-leave is only for a month." It was not said in my hearing, or I should have been bound to notice it"—again the major's colour rose, this time irefully—"but I think those who did hear it were to blame in letting it pass."

She compressed her lips to conceal a smile. After her own experiences of Ballynane, the simile seemed to her neither inapt nor unjust.

"It was grossly impertinent," she said, "and, if Mr. Archbold often indulges in such remarks, I don't wonder at his unpopularity. His exchange was forced on him by some uncle or guardian, I believe. Had he been very wild, do you know, or only rather extravagant?"

The major was frowning still; and he punished his horse, who happened to stumble just then, with hand and heel, more sharply than the fault deserved.

"I know very little of his antecedents," he answered, irritably; "for I have never troubled myself to make inquiries. There were money difficulties; but I understand these were not his only entanglements. There was a report of some *liaison*, which very nearly caused an open scandal; and London was too hot to hold him in more ways than one. As your husband and Archbold scarcely speak, he is not likely to show much at Creggmore. If it were otherwise, Mrs. Clyde, I should presume so far as to warn you against any intimate acquaintance."

It cost Mariette a severer struggle than before, to preserve her gravity. Of the motives prompting that monition, the monitor himself was really unconscious: to the object of his solicitude they were thoroughly transparent. Besides the disinterestedness of the counsel, the speaker's solemn way of taking for granted that Leonard's animosities must necessarily interfere with her own friendships, diverted this young Voltairian exceedingly. And then to think, that a man with grizzled beard should know so little of woman's ways, as not to divine the imprudence of ticketing a possible rival as

"dangerous!" Considering all the ludicrous points of the situation, Mariette kept her countenance quite admirably.

"Il est impayable, ce vieux Raton."

This is what she murmured to herself—soliloquising in French, as was her wont. This is what she said aloud,—

"Thanks for the warning, at any rate; though I don't think it will be ever needed. Now, instead of doing the absent wrong, we have done them too much honour, I think, in discussing them. Are we not nearly on the table-land? The ground looks sound on the right, and I do so long for a brushing gallop."

During the rest of the ride nothing of moment was said or done; and, if Major Griffiths' frame of mind at starting was hilarious, on his return it was simply jubilant. If words and looks go for anything, he had much strengthened his position at Creggmore; and the afternoon seemed to have developed within him certain social qualities of which he had himself been unaware. Doubtless, as Mrs. Clyde had justly remarked, he could *causer* very much to the purpose when he took the trouble. Besides—trivial as this satisfaction may seem—Griffiths, like any other born horse-jockey, exulted not a little in having secured a palpable bargain in Norah. All caution and remonstrance notwithstanding, Mariette had insisted on taking the mare over two or three banks and walls, and the latter had performed faultlessly; in her gallop, too, she had moved with much greater freedom than when tried at home. Beyond question, in yesterday's deal Cymro had bested the Celt.

Riding into Ballynane, they encountered more than one of those who had been so keen in their inquiries that morning on parade; and these Griffiths saluted in passing—they had no time to halt—with affable dignity, even as a victorious consul, progressing towards the Capitoline may have saluted his clients from the height of the triumphal car.

That night, after mess, quitting the ante-room even earlier than was his wont, the Major opened his stable with his own key, and, lighting the lantern, stood for some minutes watching Norah plucking briskly at the hay-rack.

"A good doer," quoth the major half aloud; and, stepping up to the mare, he patted her neck with unusual tenderness; for even with dumb creatures he was not wont

to deal over gently, and had never owned a four-footed favourite.

Could he had foreseen the events to which yonder pleasant ride was the prelude, he would have put a bullet through that knowing brown head, before he slept.





CHAPTER XIX.

CLARE ARCHBOLD'S RETURN TO THE REGIMENT.

EVEN in a Carmelite convent, I suppose some sad visages lighten up when the refectory bell is ringing ; and, even in Ballynane barracks, there was some cheeriness in the sounding of the dinner call. The mess of the 120th was not, strictly speaking, a convivial one ; nevertheless, it did not lack a certain mild goodfellowship, and a few stock jokes and harmless banterings were usually on hand. But this evening a gloom seemed to pervade the mess-room ; and there was scarcely an attempt at conversation, unless grumbling at the diet, and a few remarks uttered in undertones, could be taken as such. Probably no one there, either in his civil or military capacity, had any extraordinary excuse for sulking : yet the sulking was very apparent.

Now, if a stranger, entering the room for the first time, had been bidden to guess at the cause of all this discontent, surely the last person at whom he would have pointed an accusing finger was the meek pale man at the lower end of the table, dallying with his food with such an evident want of appetite.

In very truth, it would be difficult to conceive a more inoffensive creature, or one, to all outward appearance, less likely to imperil the peace of communities and of individuals, than Clare Archbold. He was not even of a

goodly presence ; for, in allowing that he had a small well-shaped head, a neat, rather frail figure, clear quiet eyes, and slender extremities, you might have summed up his physical advantages. His voice, though not inharmonious, was too monotonous to be quite a pleasant one ; and his manner—as Major Griffiths had justly observed—was notable for nothing beyond a mild melancholy.

That such an “innocent” could sow seeds of discord, seemed too grossly improbable. Nevertheless, you must remember that mechanism, both powerful and elaborate, may be spoiled by the intrusion of a few grains of sand ; and flesh and blood are not less easily affected than brass and steel.

When Clare Archbold was gazetted to the 120th, his future comrades decided at once—tacitly, if not in so many words—that he would be sure to give himself airs, and must be put down accordingly. When he joined, they were rather disappointed at meeting such a perfectly pacific person ; but the disappointment could hardly be disagreeable ; and, without doubt, by the use of ordinary tact, at small pains, Archbold might easily have turned the tide of prejudice. But he had thrown away better chances than this, ere now, rather than endure the slight trouble or hardship needful to secure them. Take one instance for an example.

He had backed an extreme outsider for a certain race, to win a very large stake. A wonderful trial, the news of which only reached town after business hours, brought the horse up with a rush in the betting, and, by sending in his commission early on the morrow, Archbold might have hedged his money at a fabulous profit. He went late to rest with the best intentions of so doing ; but, when his servant woke him, the morning was cold and rainy, and Clare turned again to his pillow placidly, to sleep the sleep of the just. Before he was thoroughly awake, the race had been run, the outsider beaten, and another cantle out of a minished patrimony had been cast *ad cames*.

In his new quarters he did not deliberately desire to incur the enmity of his brethren-in-arms, but was simply indifferent to their growing dislike. When addressed, he always answered with perfect urbanity ; but seldom originated a

subject, or exerted himself to sustain a conversation. Such remarks, as that one quoted above by the incensed major, were quite an exception to his rule, and seemed to escape him, as it were, involuntarily. Indeed, his whole attitude may be described as absolutely passive. All military duties he performed without reluctance, as without zeal; nevertheless it was impossible to find fault here, and even the major was fain to allow that on parade there was no smarter subaltern. From regimental amusements, such as they were, he invariably stood aloof. When asked to cut in to the nightly rubber, he declined, saying that "he seldom or ever played now." Yet he had notoriously been one of the heaviest and most successful players at the "Chandos;" and the highest living whist authority had prophesied great things of his game. Lounging twice or thrice into the billiard-room when the table was unoccupied, and taking up a cue carelessly, he had made the balls perform such strange feats as caused the marker to stare in amazement. But he had always some excuse ready when solicited to join in a pool, and could not be prevailed upon to make a match on any terms. If the afternoon was fine, he usually walked out with his sketch-book; if it was wet, he remained in his own quarters, finishing a water-coloured drawing, or reading French novels, of which he had a constantly renewed supply. He had rather an extensive correspondence; and Lieutenant Pryor, examining Archbold's letters as they lay in the ante-room, had noted, with much awe and envy, that not a few bore coronets on the envelopes, and were directed in a delicate female hand. It was impossible to affirm that in his manner there was either superciliousness or assumption of superiority; but it was none the less evident that he neither had, nor was likely to have, a single feeling in common with his present comrades, and that he regarded himself, morally speaking, as a castaway.

Therefore, perhaps, it was not strange that in his presence the others felt a kind of reserve. The regimental jester let off his little jokes, with a consciousness of their hanging fire; the gossips retailed the last piece of fashionable news almost timidly; the sporting lot discussed racing matters with bated breath; and the whist-players blundered worse than their wont, as he stood watching them with a faint

wondering smile. In fine, the 120th looked on their new comrade as a thorough "wet blanket," and treated him accordingly.

If I have described these details more minutely than seems needful, it is because some ensuing events may thus partially be accounted for.

On this special evening, however, Archbold seemed in an unusually sociable mood—questioning his nearest neighbour as to how things, regimental and otherwise, had gone at Ballynane in his absence; and volunteering some information, new to everyone there present, bearing on a famous trial just then pending. When they adjourned into the ante-room, he strolled towards a corner where Streatfield had already ensconced himself, and sat down beside him. For a minute or two Archbold appeared intent only on making his cigar draw evenly; then he remarked carelessly,—

"By-the-bye, when you were talking of Ballynane news, it's rather odd that you never mentioned the bride. Curious rhyme, too, that word makes—doesn't it? Would you mind describing her?"

The other winced a little, like one who has been pricked sharply, though not unexpectedly; and, as it were, pulled himself together. He was not well read in Shakespeare, or he would perhaps have said inwardly, "Aha! art thou there?"

It has already been hinted that Streatfield, ever since he acted officially at Fulmerstone, had a vague idea of owning some small vested interest in the Clyde *ménage*; and, independently of this, though by no means devoted to Leonard, he was on more confidential terms with the latter than any other of his fellows. The evil report concerning Archbold's morals, alluded to by Major Griffiths, had been circulated throughout the regiment; and Streatfield would as willingly have opened the fold-gate to a noted "sheepkiller" (his father was an opulent grazier) as have helped Clare in any wise to gain a footing at Creggmore. For some seconds he paused, wishing to baffle or evade the insidious question; and, at last, seeing no avenue of escape, made dogged answer—

"I'm not good at descriptions, and there is not much to describe. Mrs. Clyde is very amusing, talks sixteen to the

dozen, and I suppose some people would call her pretty; but that's a matter of taste. I don't myself admire hair so nearly red. She has a neat figure, and looks wonderfully well on horseback."

"Talks well—rides well—dresses well, of course—and she married 'Calico.'"

So Clare muttered under his breath, as though not meaning to be overheard. But the other caught up the cudgels hotly.

"And why the —— shouldn't she have married him? If 'Calico' (I doubt if you'd call him so to his face) is a swell with fine finikin manners, hasn't he as good a right to a nice wife as his neighbours?"

"I beg your pardon," the other returned, with much meekness. "I ought not to have used the nickname; it slipped out unawares. As good a right as his neighbours? Quite as good, no doubt—perhaps even better. She *is* nice, then? So I supposed, when I first heard she was a Locksley."

That speech by no means quenched the other's ire. Indeed, the covert sneer therein was palpable, even to his obtuseness; but he did not exactly see how to handle it: besides, his wordy valour was fast oozing away, and he had no mind to prolong the tilt with such an opponent. So he shifted his ground.

"What do you know about the Locksleys?" he inquired, with a sulky suspicion in his narrow eyes.

"Not very much. But I have shot once or twice at the Leasowes—that's their place, you know. Indeed, our families, I believe, are somehow connected."

Streatfield's jaw literally fell, and his inquisitive glance changed into a vacant stare. For a minute or two he felt quite dazed. Was it possible that this man purposed to appear at Creggmore in kinsman's guise, and arrogate to himself kinsman's privileges?

"It is very easy to invent relationships," he growled at length, scarcely knowing what he said.

"Very easy," the other assented placidly. "But it don't require much invention, when you've got a—pedigree."

Then, as if the subject was exhausted, Archbold rose, leaving Streatfield (whose ancestry was of the very vaguest)

to digest that last remark as he might ; and lounged listlessly towards the opposite corner of the ante-room, where he watched the whist for ten minutes or so. Then he departed to his own quarters, and was not seen again that evening.

It was some time before the other lieutenant emerged from the brown study into which he had been cast. Being, as it chanced, subaltern of the day, he could not venture to walk down to Creggmore to warn his comrade of the impending peril ; and, had it been otherwise, the fear of Mrs. Clyde's taking his interference amiss, would probably have deterred him. So he went eventually to his rest in doubt and dolour : and Night, contrary to her wont, brought him no counsel.





CHAPTER XX.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

WHEN Clyde, the next morning on parade, was put in possession of the situation, he was wroth enough to satisfy his informant. He utterly repudiated the Archbold connection; stigmatising it as a "dead plant," and declared that, after one formal visit, "yonder stuck-up prig" should never darken his door.

But this unlucky Bobadil lacked even the thin surface-courage necessary for the playing of the part; and, with him, to determine and to execute were widely different matters. When, a little later, Archbold came up and saluted him with his usual cool courtesy, Leonard was ludicrously unequal to the emergency.

"I must congratulate you on your marriage," Clare observed,—“the more so, because, as I daresay Streatfield has told you, Mrs. Clyde and I are not very distantly related. I shall be glad to make her acquaintance, if she's likely to be at home to-day.”

Whilst he was speaking, he kept his eyes—with all their placidity, they could be very resolute at times—steadily fixed on Clyde's face; just as experienced dog-breakers do, going up for the first time to a strange cross-grained hound. And Clyde shifted to and fro on his feet uneasily; and, instead of repelling the other's advances rudely, as he had intended,

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definite invitation to Creggmore. But, at the bottom of his sullen heart, he felt that till this moment he had never thoroughly hated Clare Archbold. The latter did not then prolong the conversation ; but, after a word or two of thanks and assent, went to rejoin his company. The two did not come in contact again that forenoon ; and, as soon as he was free from duty, Leonard betook himself to Creggmore.

With considerable mental labour, he had constructed the framework of a conjugal lecture for Mariette's benefit. He had never, either before or since their marriage, decisively asserted himself ; and here was a choice opportunity for so doing. So he stalked out of the barrack gates full of valiance, holding his head at least two inches higher than its wont, and sniffing the air in tauric fashion. As he walked along, however, his stride shortened perceptibly ; the discourse, which ran off glibly enough an hour ago, seemed now not so easy to deliver ; and, when he reached home, his dignified choler had faded into vague fractiousness. Nevertheless, his countenance was so unusually glum and lowering, that Mariette, who seldom noticed such symptoms, was constrained to inquire if anything had gone wrong in barracks.

"Nothing particularly wrong," Leonard growled. "Only that cursed Archbold's come back ; and that's enough to set everyone's teeth on edge."

"I can't understand the pleasure of cursing people absent," she said. "It must be so much more effective to do it to their faces. But I suppose, like your old countrywoman, you think 'swearing is a gran' set-off to conversation.' And so the regimental *bête noire* has actually turned up at last ? I insist on his being brought immediately. I'm too curious to know if he's as black as he's been painted."

"He won't need much bringing," Clyde retorted. "He'll be heré fast enough of his own accord. He's discovered—or pretends to have discovered—that he's a distant connection of yours, and means to claim kinship, I suppose. It's a rank imposture, of course ; but who's to prove it ?"

She laughed out merrily, and her face brightened with frank natural pleasure ; just as it had done when she felt herself, after a long interval, once more fairly settled in the saddle.

"*Mais quelle aubaine !* I've been looking for a cousin ever since I was a child—there's nothing so useful—and only think of his starting up here ! If I were a 'Roman,' as they call it, I would burn six great candles to *Notre Dame de Bon Secours*."

As her face brightened, Clyde's scowl grew darker. The gay levity with which his own prejudices were ignored, was somehow more galling than violent rebellion. Out of the very bitterness of his heart issued a faint gush of courage ; and though it was sorely maimed and curtailed, he did, in some wise, deliver himself of the discourse composed in the forenoon. As it was exceedingly incoherent, and more expetive than explanatory, it is not worth recording at length. But the purport of it was, that he had given in too long to Mariette's whims and fancies ; that, now and thenceforth, he intended to be master of his own house ; and that his first measure of authority would be to dictate who should, or should not, visit there.

She heard him out without a syllable of interruption. But, long before he had ended, he had little cause to complain of the lightsome gaiety of her face ; and she answered in a tone quite strange to her husband's ears—it was so unnaturally measured and calm.

"I am very glad you have spoken so, this morning, Leonard ; it is so much better we should understand each other thoroughly, and once for all. You say you will be master in your own house ? So far as your own actions are concerned, you may be so without hindrance from me. So far as my actions are concerned, you shall not be master—now or ever. If you think you can force or frighten me into submission, it is very easy to try the experiment. You cannot say that I have deluded you ; or that, either before or after marriage, I ever allowed you to suppose I would be thwarted or controlled."

He broke in, stuttering and stammering with passion.

"Why—why—didn't you promise—didn't you swear—before the altar, to obey ?"

She laughed outright again ; but not so musically.

"And I promised to honour, did I not ? Though you are not good at French, you can translate, *à l'impossible nul n'est tenu*. It's not worth while wrangling over forms of

words, and there's no necessity for wrangling at all. As I have taken your name, I do not intend to disgrace it ; and I can take perfectly good care of myself, without any interference of yours. You'll find it much simpler to trust me than to watch me ; and it will come to just the same thing in the end."

You would not have thought it was the gay reckless Zingara who was speaking ; but rather some staid diplomat, settling the conditions of a treaty, with a certain advantage of the situation. Leonard Clyde felt the ground yielding under his feet : his blatant passion, before that insolent cynicism, was like a straw fire lighted at the base of a granite wall. The very consciousness of defeat brought his exasperation to a climax ; and, in his despair, he nearly—very nearly—resorted to brutal violence ; for, whilst he gasped for breath, he clenched his hand stealthily.

Mariette was a thorough Locksley, after all : that family, if all tales were true, had rather a knack of carrying through a weak cause with a high hand. Noticing her husband's gesture, she read his thoughts like a book ; and her lip curled, with a careless contemptuous smile that he had good reason to recognise.

"It won't do, Leonard," she said, coolly. "If you meant to take that line, you ought to have married one of your father's factory girls. We've had more than enough of this. You've said your say, and I've said mine. And now, suppose we go to luncheon ? It must be nearly cold already, and I'm exceedingly hungry."

He glared at her for a few seconds savagely ; but, gradually, his eyes drooped and were averted ; and, with an execration on his lips, he flung out of the room, crashing to the door behind him. Indeed, a precipitate retreat was about the only course open to the Clyde contingent—beaten at all points of the line.

Individuals, no less than nations, bent on asserting their rights have found out, ere now, the mistake of intempestive revolt. In striking for liberty, an essential point is to strike neither too late, nor too soon. Therefore, let others, in like evil case, take warning from the result of this luckless warrior's first and last struggle for independence.

Mariette, howsoever inwardly content, seemed by no means elated by her victory. She ate her solitary lunch—for Leonard was far too sulky to appear—with excellent appetite; and then went up-stairs to put a few finishing touches to apparel already sufficiently becoming; and, as she stood before her dressing-glass, she carolled one of her wickedest *chansonnettes*. The gay refrain floating into the chamber, where Leonard sat in high dudgeon, brought on a fresh paroxysm of impotent fury.

Without any definite purpose in view, Mariette had decided over-night not to ride that day. Indeed, the weather was not tempting for any outdoor exercise; so she nestled into her arm-chair, and her lithe fingers were soon busy with the broidery-work at which they excelled. Several visitors drooped in, in the course of the afternoon; but none of these made any prolonged stay, except Mr. Streatfield. He was, if possible, rather less conversational than usual. Yet there he remained a hopeless fixture; and though his platitudes were hardly answered at last, he still held his ground stolidly.

"I wonder if Leonard has put him there *en faction*," Mariette said to herself; and, at the very notion, her quick temper began to rise. She did not stand much on ceremony with any of her *habitués*; and a brusque point-blank question, which would have greatly startled Streatfield, was hovering on her lips, when the door opened, and Archbold was announced.

The first glance disappointed Mariette. She had expected to see a quiet person, certainly, but rather distinguished-looking withal, and bearing a visible *cachet* of gentle birth and breeding. Now, in this man's outward seeming there was little to distinguish him from the common herd; and she doubted if the note of the black swan would differ much, after all, from that of the geese already cackling around her.

But, before Clare had spoken half-a-dozen sentences, Mariette confessed that she had been unjust, and wondered no longer at the jealousies and heart-burnings of his fellows. Oddly enough, too, Streatfield, too, albeit anything but fine of ear, it seemed as if he heard Clare speak for the first time. The monotony of voice and manner, referred to above, had quite disappeared; and, though always perfectly

self-possessed and at his ease, his courtesy was anything but cold. The veriest rustic might have noticed all this, and it was not likely to escape Mariette.

She had never lived in what is generally known as "good society;" but not a **few** of Arthur Locksley's associates, foreigners especially, had, like himself, been born and bred to better things; and, howsoever dilapidated morally, kept a fair outward polish to the last. So Mrs. Clyde was no mean judge in such matters; and, though she had no special delicacy of sentiment or refinement of feeling, Pete Harradine's eye was not keener on the points of a "cocktail" than hers on the points of a *parvenu*.

Archbold alluded to their probable relationship in almost his first sentence; but he did not seem inclined to presume thereupon, and made himself, perhaps, less "at home" than most people would have done under the circumstances. Mariette had been chaffed, and flattered, and even adulated to satiety in her time, brief as it was. But she had never before been treated with delicate deference; and the new sensation was very agreeable. The whole effect, indeed, was so soothing that, when Clare began to talk about the Leasowes, she listened without any bitterness, but rather with the melancholy interest of an exile hearing others speak of his native land; and there was nothing feigned in her sigh, when she owned, with perfect frankness, her ignorance of the locality, and her great longing to visit it.

Altogether, it was a very successful little social banquet; albeit there sat persistently thereat the regular skeleton, clothed in the substantial flesh of Streatfield. Howsoever, if eavesdropping was that worthy's game, he took little by his pertinacity; and might have spent the afternoon more amusingly, if not more profitably, amongst his comrades at pool. With all his stolid self-assurance, he did not venture to tarry behind, when, after a visit almost briefer than the occasion demanded, Archbold rose to go.

As the two walked away together, Streatfield remembering their conversation of the night before, naturally waited for some expression of his companion's opinion of their hostess; but he waited in vain. Even as he went out of Mariette's presence, the animation of Clare's face, and the

cordiality of his manner, vanished as a light breath from a mirror—leaving the surface smooth, hard, and cold as ever. Betwixt the house door and the gate of Creggmore he spoke never a word. When they reached the road, he turned on his heel with an unceremonious nod, and walked away countrywards ; so that the other was fain to return, alone, to billiards and other distractions of Ballynane.





CHAPTER XXI

QUITE PLATONIC.

MOST people who have sojourned, even for a little while, in one of the "lone lands" which, in spite of exploration and exploitation, are still to be found on this globe of ours, will remember their sensations when a compatriot unexpectedly appeared on the scene. The new comer might be the most commonplace of mortals, or, indeed, one who, under ordinary circumstances, would have bored you to extinction; nevertheless, for the nonce, he seemed strangely "sympathetic;" and, in the course of the first evening you, not improbably, treated him to more confidences than you ever imparted to your closest familiar, in the smoking-room of your favourite club. Meeting this worthy creature again, in after-days, in the old country—such is the ingratitude of our fallen nature—you would, perhaps, wonder at your infatuation, after the fashion of disenchanted Titania.

Somewhat in this light, Mariette Clyde, even during their first interview, came to regard Clare Archbold. Unlike any other person whom she had encountered since her marriage—he could talk to her about things and places that she knew by heart, and about the kinsfolk whom she only knew by name, and talk as if he understood her. As their acquaintance ripened, it is not strange if these two were drawn more closely together. In all her life Mariette had

never had a companion. Arthur Locksley, as has been narrated above, was always engrossed by his own selfish plans and pleasures ; and his rare visitors usually came with an object, and had no time to waste on one whom they considered as a mere child. Of the people she met abroad, the women, after realising her belongings, were apt rather to stand aloof ; and the men, at the best, treated her as a pretty toy, to be taken up for their amusement and set aside at their convenience. Even Harradine, with all his goodwill, could not give her companionship : indeed, there was but one subject on which poor Pete could really sustain a conversation, and the fastest of modern Atalantas will not willingly talk "horse" for ever.

Now Clare Archbold could string off racing slang glibly enough on occasion ; for his costly experiences at Newmarket, and elsewhere, had not been wholly wasted ; and, when it was too late to profit thereby, he had acquired some slight insight into the crooked ways of the turf : but this was by no means his favourite topic. Furthermore, he and Mariette had one or two other tastes in common. Archbold's water-colour drawings could scarcely be judged by the amateur standard ; and Mariette, though her talent had never been properly cultivated, had both power and facility of pencil. Now she began to take lessons regularly ; and Clare, who was genuinely imbued with the artist-spirit, took evident pride and pleasure in her progress. Both were admirable French scholars : but, though Mariette spoke the language rather more fluently, in writing it Clare was decidedly her superior ; and, as the reading of neither was quite limited to light literature, a wide ground of common interest was opened up.

On the whole, here was the framework of a very promising friendship, constructed on pure Platonic lines ; and it might, perchance, have turned out quite a model edifice, if meddlesome folk had only let well alone.

It must be averred that the changed state of things at Creggmore was the occasion of no little discontent and evil speaking in the garrison of Ballynane.

The person naturally most interested in the question—Leonard Clyde, to wit—seemed tolerably satisfied with the new dispensation. That abortive effort at independence

had exhausted his rebellious tendencies ; and he had subsided into acquiescence, sullen, perhaps, but still complete. Indeed, having once accepted the situation, the sordid instincts of his huckstering blood prompted him to see if he could not in some way profit thereby ; on the principal of those accommodating galley-slaves, who, instead of gnawing and rending at their chains, contrive, with their cunning handiwork, to furnish themselves with all the luxuries of the Bagne. Up to the present time, his aristocratic alliance had not brought him in nearly as good social interest as he had reckoned on. Here, in Ballynane, as he had begun by openly discrediting the connection, he could not indulge in any extensive swagger ; but, when he went home on leave, it would be pleasant to talk of " his cousins, the Archbolds ; " and, if Clare could be tempted to visit Glencorquodale, the " effect " would be really startling. Moreover, Leonard began to realise that the advantages of his submission were not exclusively perspective. Though, beyond question, he still hated Archbold, it gratified his coarse vanity, to appear on *quasi* familiar terms with the man who so markedly kept aloof from the body of his comrades. Clare never deigned to conciliate, much less to curry favour with his host ; but he treated him, both in private and public, with unvaried courtesy ; and, more than once, when the latter was being " baited,"—the duration of Clyde's popularity had been brief—he had struck in to the rescue, and, with one or two of his cool impertinencies, turned the tide of banter against the tormentors.

Also, Leonard was fain to acknowledge that things, now, went much more pleasantly and smoothly at Creggmores. He had always, of course, been free to come and go as he listed ; so there was no difference here : but, somehow, the climate within doors had grown more genial and home-like. There had been no conjugal skirmishes since the decisive battle, and Mariette, if not actually kinder, was less imperious than heretofore. If Leonard chose to smoke, throughout a whole wet afternoon, in the room where the drawing lesson was in progress, neither master nor pupil seemed in the least vexed or embarrassed by his presence, but chatted on, perfectly at their ease, till sometimes even Leonard's dull ears would be agreeably tickled ; though he compre

hended the discourse not much more than a seal does the music it follows. On the whole, he seemed tolerably comfortable; and, if he had any qualms or disquietudes, confided them only to *M. de Cognac*, whose acquaintance he cultivated more sedulously than ever.

Others, however, looked at the Creggmore arrangements far less charitably. Lieutenant Streatfield, to begin with, though he could not possibly have defined the grounds thereof, felt oppressed by a chronic personal grievance. Having once ventured to sound Clyde on the subject—meaning to contrast the present state of things with the latter's sentiments, as expressed that morning on parade—he met with such a coarse rebuff as effectually deterred him from the like audacity in the future. The retort was delivered with such unusual promptitude and decision, that Streatfield suspected the speaker had been primed for the occasion.

Indeed, each and every one of Mariette's former worshippers had his own sense of ill-usage; albeit—with a single exception—it might be even vaguer than Streatfield's. That afternoon gathering at Creggmore had not been to any of these honest fellows a dangerous excitement; nevertheless, like the omnibus driver's cold tea—"it was something to look forward to." And now all this was spoiled. The hostess never showed herself inhospitable, or betrayed, either by word or manner, that any visit was unwelcome. But her curious knack of putting shy people at their ease was no longer displayed: the conversation would still languish on after a fashion; but the *vivida vis* was absent. They did not care to sit there, making sport for Clare Archbold, who—rarely joining in the conversation, except when he addressed a brief remark to Mariette, as often as not in a foreign tongue—seemed to watch their efforts with an indolent curiosity, just as ancient mariners, lounging on a pier-head, watch the tackings of a craft handled by amateurs. So the visitors fell off one by one; till, at last, the calls at Creggmore were scarcely more frequent than formal civility required.

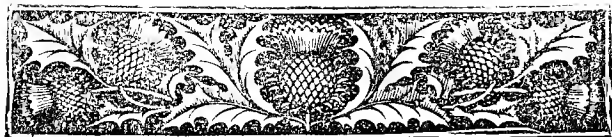
It would be unjust to say that personal *pique* alone was at the bottom of the general discontent. If there was not much sagacity to be found inside those dull barrack walls,

there was not lacking a certain amount of sturdy common-sense, and honesty to boot. More than one of these men—especially of the seniors—though they never avowed it to their comrades, were conscious of a certain burden in the atmosphere, ominous of evil to come. Only the shrewd old surgeon put these vague misgivings into words; and he confided them to the wife of his bosom in allegorical form.

Asked if he had heard anything new in barracks that day—quoth Jock Macalister, relapsing into Doric, as was his wont when strongly moved—

“Jeanie, woman, I heard the first sough of a wind that will blaw some of them to the vara Deevil before a’s said and dune.”





CHAPTER XXII.

THE AGONY OF EVAN GRIFFITHS.



PEAKING of the discontent ensuing on the new *régime* at Creggmore, we made one exception, you will remember.

In truth, Major Griffiths' disquietudes were by no means vague; and there was both form and substance in his forebodings. He had, all along, felt an instinctive dread of Archbold's return; but the result seemed to have outrun his worst fears. At any rate—as the mutual antipathy of the two was no secret—the major had anticipated that it would cost Clare some time, tact, and trouble to make good his footing under any roof where Leonard Clyde was even nominally master; and he had argued that in his wonderful indolence, the ex-guardsman might not, after all, care to strategise. But the door had been opened to the evil visitant even without knocking; and he had entered into a house swept and garnished. The plea of kinsmanship Griffith looked upon as a palpable and rather common-place *ruse*; and it would have been difficult to say whether his wrath burned most fiercely against the author of the trick or the wittol hood-winked thereby.

He was not of a temperament to abandon any position that he was minded to keep without a struggle, and more than one struggle. So, on the very first propitious occasion

—his next ride with Mariette—he opened the subject briskly.

“A few days ago you asked me for a character, Mrs. Clyde. Do you think I gave it fairly or unfairly?”

“Very fairly,” Mariette replied — “speaking according to your light. Now, don’t be offended. Your light, I dare say, may be much better and clearer than mine; and I’ve no more idea of exalting Mr. Archbold than I have of depreciating the rest of the regiment. I can perfectly understand why he is not a favourite with his brother officers. But don’t you think it just possible, that he started with a prejudice against him, and was made aware of this? That would make such a difference on both sides. I only suggest it, because I’ve never met anybody more perfectly easy to get on with, or, to all outward appearance, more thoroughly unaffected.”

He looked askance at her out of his restless black eyes, as he repeated her words.

“It makes such a difference on both sides, when you have tastes and feelings in common. They tell me, too, that Archbold claims to be some distant connection of yours, Mrs. Clyde. Is this true?”

She guessed that this last query was meant to be comprehensive, and answered with proportionate decision.

“Perfectly true. Beyond question our families have been related, and not in the mythical times either. He has stayed more than once at the Leasowes; and it is pleasant—though it makes one envious—to hear anyone, who has been there quite lately, talk of the old Locksley home.”

Now, if the major had not decided within himself irrevocably that the said plea of kinsmanship was an arrant imposture, that last shot would have touched one of his weak points. With very vague ideas as to a man’s duties towards posterity, he had very strict ideas as to a man’s duties towards his ancestry; and he could conceive no curiosity more legitimate, than that concerning a family home or family annals. But this view of the case he utterly refused to recognise; and his face lowered, more and more sullenly, as he made answer:

“I was wrong on one point at all events—thinking it

improbable that Archbold would find ready welcome at Creggmore. In such a case—do you remember?—I said I might presume to warn you. May I do so now, Mrs. Clyde?”

It would not have been easy to read aright the language of her eyes just then: something of menace they spoke; but behind this was covert mirth.

“Presumption is not at all the word for it,” she said, carelessly. “Nevertheless, Major Griffiths, I should be sorry to hear you press that point, now or hereafter. We are excellent friends—are we not?—and I much prefer leaving well alone. Now, if the very oldest friend I have—one who has been as good or better, than a father to me—were to broach this subject, I think it more than likely we should quarrel; because warnings are a physic I never could swallow. So we won’t try dangerous experiments, if you please. When I thanked you for your kind intentions before, I told you they would never be needed; and I say just the same now, though the circumstances are not the same. I think you’re all utterly wrong about Mr. Archbold. To my mind, he is neither a miracle nor a monster, but simple a *dilettante*, with rather expensive tastes, and decidedly out of place here. But, if he were the worst of wolves in sheep’s clothing, you needn’t be under the least alarm for me. *Bah! nous avons vu d’autres.*”

Her low laugh rippled over with gay confidence. Through the mist of prejudice and passion in which the unhappy man, listening there, was already groping, a flash of honest light did sometimes penetrate. He felt sure that she spoke the truth, and nothing but the truth, here; and that few Christian matrons were safer in their purity of principle, than was this little heathen in her cool dauntless self-reliance. Perchance, in a mere practical point of view, he judged rightly. Nevertheless, sooner than see sister of theirs safe behind such a rampart, built up so early and on such a foundation, many would gladly see her safe in her coffin under a cross of white flowers.

After all, the major was only partially reassured, and not even partially comforted; but he had not nerve to protract the discussion then; neither did he ever again revive it.

Long ago his harsh peremptory manner had been toned down in Mariette's presence, and the work of subjugation had gone on very rapidly. Now, though he still kept up a bold exterior, the slightest sign of her rising temper caused him more inward quaking than his own fiercest tirade had ever caused to timid subaltern; and he would have submitted to almost any indignity sooner than have risked a serious quarrel.

From that very day forward, the agony of Evan Griffiths began.

Though he had sinned, in some fashions, less than most exposed to like temptations, there were written down against this man, be sure, more than his share of offences against charity. But on the opposite page must have been set down what he endured, as days passed into weeks, and weeks into months, and always his torment grew keener. If the sight of the growing intimacy betwixt the so-called cousins chafed others, simply because it interfered with their convenience or amusement, you may guess how it acted on one of his habits and temper. And yet from that sight he could not avert his eyes. There were hours when he was sure to have found Mariette alone; but, by an odd perversity, he timed his visits to Creggmore so as to be almost certain to find Archbold there. On these occasions, he never attempted to engross Mariette's conversation—seldom, indeed, responded to her advances in this line. He seemed to prefer listening. Yet he did not listen to much purpose; for, very often his answers to direct questions were strangely little pertinent to the subject. But all the while, a close observer would have noted a haggard vigilance lurking under his bent brows; and, at the slightest sign of intelligence, or familiar expression, interchanged betwixt those other two—set his teeth as hard as he would—the major could not always keep the corners of his mouth from twitching.

Very early in their acquaintance, you must know, Mariette entirely dropped Clare's prefix and surname; and though Clare never claimed the like privilege, he, so to speak, rounded the difficulty by christening her "Emerald" after the heroine of a French romance just then in vogue.

Almost daily, for half an hour or so, Griffiths would

undergo this torture, and then, returning to his own quarters, would "have it out" with himself savagely. In self-discipline he was merciless as the most zealous of Flagellants; but incredible as it may seem, during these inward conflicts he never once came face to face with the actual truth.

He was perfectly conscious of being fascinated by Mariette; but he believed this to be only the harmless attraction of a woman who had seemed, from the first, to understand him, better than any other of her sex whom he had yet encountered. If their friendship had only been allowed to grow gradually and prosperously, as it once promised to do, he thought he would have been fully content, and never have craved for more. He was conscious, too, of a sombre enmity against Clare Archbold. But he set this down to the righteous indignation of one who is compelled to watch, with folded hands, the development of some black treason or crime. That he had ever coveted this woman as his mistress, or hated this man as his rival, he would have denied as emphatically as it is possible to deny any false accusation whatever. He called himself fool and coward, and harder names yet, for troubling himself about the Clyde *ménage*, and for haunting Creggmore, when, if he had not ceased to be welcome, he had ceased to feel at home there. But he never charged himself with adultery in intention, any more than with murder in the like degree.

All this may sound absurdly improbable. Yet remember that none have yet measured the possible length and breadth of human self-delusion; and that the world and the flesh sometimes produce fanatics, baser in outward seeming, yet not more of hypocrites, than those who have wrought foully and cruelly in the name of the true faith.

Though he had so contrived to hoodwink himself as to be sensible of neither shame nor remorse, the incessant irritation told fearfully on Evan Griffiths. His features, always rather sharp and meagre, began to wear a pinched look; those restless eyes of his were never in repose, even for an instant; his brisk bodily energy had changed to a sort of nervous jerkiness; and his manner had grown fretful, rather than peremptory.

Yet all this time, strange to say, he kept his temper under wonderful control. He never relaxed a point of discipline; and, when he inspected the ranks at open order, a knapsack hung awry, or a belt carelessly cleaned, was less likely to escape detection now than heretofore. But, when it came to actual infliction of punishment, he was certainly more lenient; and he seldom or never indulged in those bursts of oburgation for which he had been celebrated. After all, this is not so hard to explain. As was aforesaid, he had his own sense of justice and sense of honour; and he would no more have made the rules of the service safety-valves for his own evil temper, than he would have diverted regimental funds to his own profit. As for verbal violence, he was, doubtless, afraid now of the result, if his wrath got fairly out of his hands.

With his brother officers, too, he so conducted himself, that there could be no fair ground of complaint. His habits had always been taciturn and unsocial; and there was nothing strange in seeing him sit almost silent throughout mess, and disappear into his own quarters soon after the move into the ante-room was made. But the subalterns were not snapped at nearly so often; and his demeanour towards Archbold was specially guarded. It must be owned, however, that Clare not only knew his duty thoroughly, but performed it to the letter; so that there was little scope for fault-finding here.

The head-quarters of the 120th, if rather a prosaic set, were not dullards all. Very soon it was whispered abroad that "something had gone wrong with the major;" and, though each man formed his own conjecture—all probably containing some germ of the truth—the least charitable supposition imputed to him no more than mild Platonic designs, and a natural exasperation at finding himself second, instead of first-best, at Creggmore. Only the surgeon—they had served together full twenty years—used to watch Griffiths for minutes together when he could do so undisturbed, shaking his head ominously; and once asked, with manifest anxiety, when the colonel's leave would expire. The chief's return, of course, would set the major free; and Macallister deemed that absence would be the sovereignest thing on earth for the malady now tormenting his comrade.

Neither was the change in Griffiths' demeanour unnoticed at Creggmore. The intermission of the afternoon rides, which had promised so fairly, was sufficiently significant to Mariette. She did hint that "Norah" must be forgetting all she had learned in those first lessons. But the major evidently was prepared for the occasion, and excused himself from escort-duty very decisively ; intimating, however, that his horses were always at Mrs. Clyde's command. She knew what that meant well enough, and, with a little regretful sigh, folded away her habit for the present. Also, it became more evident daily, that her pertinacious visitor was never now at his ease in her presence. She was sorry for all this ; for she had liked the peppery, peremptory Welshman in a sort of way, and it had amused her not a little to watch that rugged, intractable spirit becoming meek and tame under her influence. But she speedily realised that here it was not possible to "run with the hare and hunt with the hounds," and took her line accordingly.

This young philosopher was not more outspoken to others than to herself, and never for a moment blinked the real reason of Griffiths' disquietude. It would be easy enough to make all things smooth, by simply putting back her new favourite on the same footing with his fellows. But the idea of such a compromise never crossed her mind.

"Give up Clare ?" quoth Mariette to herself. "Not for a field-marshal—let alone a field officer."

And, while she thus soliloquised, her cheek did not flush ever so faintly, nor did her pulse beat quicker or stronger. There was nothing of the recklessness here of a woman read to sacrifice anything rather than resign a guilty pleasure ; but simply cool, matured calculation. Mariette had lighted on a companion exactly to her mind, and was prepared to make the most of this, as she would have done of any other specially lucky chance. But she was absolutely heart-whole. Archbold's presence made her life lighter, no doubt, and regulated it, too, after a fashion ; but he left thereon no more lasting impression than the sun's rays leave on a dial.

And Clare, too, was much in the same happy condition. Finding Mariette at Ballynane, he looked upon as a crowning mercy ; and, for once, was not tempted to abuse

Heaven's clemency. He was one of those men who, by their very constitution, cannot be long content in unmixed male society; and whatsoever talents, social or otherwise, he possessed were never thoroughly developed, unless under a feminine *afflatus*. If Mariette had been homely of person, slovenly in dress, or reserved in manner, unquestionably she would never have filled up so completely the void in Clare's present existence. He liked to listen to her clear, penetrating voice, and ringing laugh; but his liking was æsthetic, rather than sensuous. Indeed, he was too thorough an artist, not to be alive to every gratification of the eye and ear.

The deference of his first address had passed into easy familiarity—though Mariette was gratified at first by that quiet courtesy, it would not have suited her to remain on those terms—but his freedom of speech never verged upon license; and, unless when Clare spoke of his own concerns, never a word passed betwixt the two that friend or foe might not have overheard.

Those same "concerns" might, perhaps, go far to account for Archbold's perfect security in an atmosphere where men of duller organisation might not have drawn breath so freely. The reports current in the regiment, concerning his past *fredaines*, were probably much exaggerated. But under all that smoke there had been some fire—very nearly a consuming fire; and the ashes still smouldered too fiercely to allow of the lifting up on this altar of any other sacrifice.

One of Mariette's earliest questions, after they grew intimate enough to venture on such topics, went to the heart of the mystery; and Clare answered her frankly and fully—withholding only names. After that, conversation never languished when they were alone. The interest that Mariette took in this idyll was not in the least forced or assumed; indeed, often when Clare checked himself—assuming that "she *must* be tired"—she would urge him to continue, with the pettish earnestness of a child baulked at the very crisis of a favourite story. Anyone who, for their sins, has been made the confidant of a man in like position, will divine that the narrator did not require over much pressing. And so a very pretty chain of confidences was established, lengthening day by day. For, in despite of all watch and

ward, a certain correspondence was still maintained ; and each of *the* letters, as it arrived—in a condensed form of course—accompanied Archbold to Creggmore.

He, too, had noticed the major's odd fidgety behaviour, and had remarked on it once or twice to Mariette. But for some reason—best known to herself—she always turned the subject dexterously aside ; and Clare was much too indolent to trouble himself about any eccentricities that did not interfere with his own convenience. Setting aside the consciousness of his own innocence—he would as soon have suspected that rigid martinet of jealousy, or any other devouring passion, as an archbishop of card-sharpping.

So, for some two months after Clare Archbold's return, everything went on smoothly and prosperously ; and, in the daily current of events at Ballynane, there was no more of break or ripple than is to be found on deep water just **where it** curves to the fall





CHAPTER XXIII.

THE GUDEMAN AWA.

THE autumn drills were well over, and the long-leave time had begun. Within the week, the colonel was to be back to take over the regiment, and Evan Griffiths would be free to go whither he would. He had resolved to take advantage of this; and, when questioned on the subject by Macallister, he said so in so many words. But, as the time drew closer, an odd presentiment fastened on him that he would not get away from Ballynane so easily. It was not so much the fear of any weakness or irresolution on his own part, as the feeling that he would be hampered by some detainer quite independent of his own will or control. He was in nowise superstitious; and, a year ago, would have flung aside such misgiving like an ill weed clinging to his garment. But he could not deal so lightly with it now; and the idea, though it only crossed his mind occasionally, fretted him not a little.

It was the Tuesday in that same week, and the major was busy with his official correspondence. Most of the letters seemed of slight import; for, after just glancing at their contents, he pushed them aside to the orderly-room clerk, one by one, with a brief remark or pencil note. Over one document, however, he pondered gravely—bending and knitting his brows. It was simple enough, too. A

request from the civil authorities, that a company might march at once into a neighbouring county town, some dozen miles distant, and be billeted there over the following evening. An election for County Treasurer was to take place on the morrow ; and, though unimportant in itself, was sure to provoke no small amount of party feeling. In those days of disaffection, it was hard to guess what proportions even an ordinary faction-fight would assume.

The major had received a dozen such requisitions ; and in carrying out this special one, there was no kind of difficulty. His perplexity had quite another cause. The next company for duty he remembered instantly, was No. 3, commanded by Barrington, whose subaltern was Leonard Clyde.

Now, that Leonard was a miserable inefficient keeper of his own castle, Griffiths was thoroughly aware ; nevertheless, he felt strangely disinclined to send him on this detachment, and so leave Creggmore without even a nominal guardian. But he did not hesitate very long. Much as this man had changed within the last two months—and that he *had* changed, even he himself would scarcely now have denied—on one point he was still the same. When it was a question of duty, the service was always paramount, and the rules thereof were bound to override any other motives. A twelve-mile tramp over Irish roads, through an Irish mist such as was then brooding without, into comfortless billets, with the prospect of a campaign wherein any amount of abuse and missiles, but not an ounce of credit could be pocketed, is a service that few soldiers, officers or privates, would volunteer for. If so, the more reason that No. 3 should not shirk its turn. At the very notion of “shirking” the major’s nostrils dilated ; and, with a snort of ire, he bade his orderly summon the adjutant at once. Two hours later, No. 3, having been duly paraded and inspected, filed out of the barrack gates in heavy marching order—a very dolorous-looking subaltern bringing up their rear.

In good sooth, if Lieutenant Clyde had been told off for a forlorn hope, he could scarcely have seemed more disconsolate. He hated the march before him, the duty that was to ensue, the mist overhead, the mire under foot, the Irish people with whom he had never had a sympathy in

common, his commanding officer, who despite his intimacy at Creggmore, never seemed disposed to relax a point in Leonard's favour ; finally, Mariette, who, when he had gone home to make some hurried arrangements, had made mock at his bemoanings. Looking back on these things, Clyde persuaded himself that some instinct of impending disaster mingled with his extreme unwillingness to quit Ballynane that day. But this was only one of the convenient after-thoughts that, on certain emergencies, start from the dullest brains, matured after the fashion of Pallas.

Amongst those who dropped in at Creggmore that afternoon, was a comparatively rare visitor—Macallister. He came to offer the shelter of his own roof to Mariette for the two nights of Leonard's absence ; for the surgeon, too, was established in a house amply large enough for his requirements, though on a more modest scale than Creggmore.

Amused wonder glittered in Mariette's eyes as, very graciously and gratefully, but very absolutely, she declined to move.

"I suppose Baden must be quite as dangerous as Ballynane," she said ; "and I've kept house *there*, alone, for days together ; and I was not a matron then. I feel perfectly safe, my kind Doctor ; and, if you and Mrs. Macallister will dine here to-morrow, you shall see if

‘There's nae luck about the house
When our gudeman's awa.’”

Her manner was so perfectly frank and easy that it might have reassured a more suspicious person than honest Jock, whose shrewdness, indeed, was in perpetual conflict with his charity, and who never thought evil of his neighbour, unless on compulsion.

The day lifted as it went on ; and, by sundown, the sky was nearly clear. About this time Major Griffiths returned from a long solitary ride. He must have ridden fast as well as far ; for Norah's flanks were not only dark with sweat, but deeply rowel-marked, and contrary to her wont, she pecked at her evening feed very gingerly. He took his place at mess as usual ; but the least observant of the few present there, noticed something strange in the major's demeanour.

He scarcely made a pretence of eating anything, but drank much beyond his usual stint; besides a remark or two, dropped almost at random, he took no part in the conversation; and, during all the first part of dinner, kept watching the door eagerly, as if expecting every moment some one to appear. That vigilant look left his face at last and was replaced by a heavy malign expression, quite foreign to its usual character. For, though easily moved to anger, he was not given to nursing his wrath.

It was a thin mess that night; for, besides those who had marched away on detachment, Archbold was an absentee. This last fact, also, had been generally noticed by everyone present; but, somehow, no one cared to allude to it till they moved into the ante-room. There they could speak with comparative freedom—Major Griffiths had gone straight from table to his own quarters—and there each tongue began to wag after its fashion. As to where Archbold was being entertained, there was no diversity of opinion; and to the verdict, that “it was a devilish cool proceeding altogether,” there was scarcely any dissentients.

“There’s no harm meant, I’ll swear,” said Ralph Lester, the adjutant, the most easy-going creature living—off parade. “But there might be harm done, if Archbold came across the major whilst the black dog was on his back. I’ve a great mind to walk down to Creggmore—not now, but an hour or so later, so that he couldn’t help walking back with me—and tell him he’s in orders for to-morrow.”

The majority, however, amongst whom Streatfield was eminent, inclined somewhat spitefully to the notion that “it was about time there *should* be a row;” and that, “though it was no particular business of the major’s, if he chose to make it hot for the guardsman, all the better.” So nothing was decided.

Evan Griffiths’ quarters were very characteristic of their tenant. There were to be found there none of the superfluous comforts that help to make up the military fiction of home. Everything was perfectly decent and in order, but perfectly prim and angular, from the scanty carpet-square to the plain narrow bookshelves on the walls, where any light literature would have seemed out of place.

In a straight-backed folding-chair of unvarnished wood, in which it would have been impossible to doze, the major sat, staring hard at the fire. That dark heavy expression was still on his face; but the comparative repose of the other features contrasted strongly with the mobility of the lips which, every few seconds, were twitching uneasily. During the last two months he had had wrestlings with himself not a few; but all these had been as child's-play beside the conflict now waging within him.

Romance and enthusiasm were both alike foreign to his nature. Comprehending nothing of either, he would have found, perhaps, a philosophical treatise easier reading than a sensational novel; and constitutional shyness caused him to shrink from notoriety—much more from scandal—as from contagion. Now, he was right well aware that scandal, at the very least, must needs ensue on his interfering in this matter. Nevertheless, as he mused, more and more strongly was borne in upon him the conviction that he was bound to interfere.

This man, as was noted above, had a kind of creed of his own—vague and informal, if you will, yet still a creed; founded, if it had any foundation beyond the light of nature, on the gloomy Calvinism forced upon his childish mind by dint of stripes and fasting.

Do we not know them—the professors of that sweetly simple faith—how lightly they pass over the many texts teaching mercy and forbearance; how viciously they emphasise utterances such as those before which “Felix trembled;” how they are less prone to exult over the salvation of the elect than over the sure damnation of the rest of humankind? *If thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee.* For generations past, this has been their watchword; and not only on their own members are they ready to ply the steel.

From the first moment of their meeting—nay, even before they met—Griffiths had been prejudiced against Clare Archbold. Without considering the 120th positively a crack corps, he was very jealous of its reputation; and the notion of the regiment's being turned into a sort of Reformatory to the Guards chafed him exceedingly; and, after Clare joined, that listless reserve of his, when once

off duty, was a perpetual exasperation to his energetic superior. But these minor *piques* had been merged, of late, in a sombre animosity, nearly akin to loathing. By dint of 'long brooding over the matter, he had come to look upon it through a medium absurdly discoloured and distorted. In fact, he had invested a very ordinary mortal, who, from very indolence, was apt rather to follow than lead into temptation, with quite diabolic attributes; and now regarded Archbold as a kind of Mephistopheles working on his own account, and to be dealt with accordingly. He did not in the least believe that the Succubus had, as yet, succeeded in his nefarious design. But then there was the more reason for exorcising him, at any risk—at any cost.

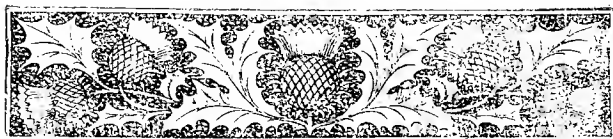
Perchance, his dazed, misguided mind grew clearer in the after-time; but then—when such consciousness might, perchance, have saved him—even Griffiths was utterly ignorant that unrighteous passion had much to do with this seemingly righteous wrath. Such self-delusion seems by no means uncommon with fanatics. Furious bigot as he was, it is doubtful if Jaques Clement would have ever fulfilled his murderous mission if, in the visions that beguiled him, had not mingled the smile of the daughter of Guise.

This unlucky night brought the venom, that had been long seething in Griffiths' breast, to the very sum of bitterness. Here was, he thought, the very insolence of profligacy. Archbold could not wait even twelve hours after the departure of her witless husband, before making Mariette Clyde's name a mark for scandalous whisper and scurril gibe. At that very instant a burst of rude laughter mounting from the ante-room, which was nearly under his quarters, set every nerve in the major's frame tingling. He knew, just as though he had been listening without, what manner of jest was going round below. And suppose—he remembered hearing of such things—Archbold was compromising his hostess, with a *purpose*? Why the murderer, whom he saw die on the scaffold last spring, was tenfold less guilty than such an one as this. The poor Ribbonman, in ignorance and misplaced fealty, had wrought the deed for which he suffered. It was in the plenitude of his evil science, and with coolness of calculation, that this other was working out, step by step, a blacker crime.

It is to be noted that never once, when his broodings were at the darkest, did he entertain a single suspicion of Mariette. She might be reckless to the verge of audacity, coquettish to the verge of cruelty, selfish to the verge of cynicism, but of disloyal intent he held her wholly guiltless. If her natural defender was helpless or supine, there was more reason why he, Evan Griffiths,—the only one whose eyes were open to the real state of the case—should thrust himself betwixt her and the coming harm. He had tried to warn Mariette, to no purpose. To-night Clare Archbold should have his warning. If he took it, it was well ; if not —

The major rose up from his seat with a fell resolve on his face, and with lips steady as stone now. He changed his mess dress hastily for a dark shooting-suit ; putting on a thick pilot jacket over all. As he was going forth, he paused with his hand on the lock of the door : then, returning, he caught up a revolver from the table and thrust it into a breast pocket. There was nothing remarkable in his so arming himself, for there prevailed, just then, much ill-blood betwixt the soldiery and the disaffected country-folk, and Ribbonism ran high in that neighbourhood ; so that it was hardly safe to stray far beyond the main street of Ballynane after dark.

The stars were bright overhead and the moon was nearly at its full. The major encountered none of his comrades in his progress across the barrack-square ; but the few soldiers lounging outside the guard-house stood up at attention as he passed. Motioning them to sit down again, he went out silently. A broad-leafed felt hat, drawn low over his brows, partially shaded his face ; and nothing in his demeanour, perhaps, warranted suspicion : but, if the corporal at the gate could have looked below the surface—stolid machine as he was—he would have closed bar and wicket against his superior at his proper peril ; for Evan Griffiths was, in very truth, no more fit to be trusted abroad that night than a Malay *amòk*.



CHAPTER XXIV.

ELYSIUM AND—DEATH!

THE *tête-à-tête* dinner, which proved such a rock of offence to everyone concerned or unconcerned in the matter, was, after all, a very unpremeditated crime. Archbold came to Creggmore that afternoon much later than his wont, and it so happened there was more than usual to discuss ; for Mariette had just completed her most successful water-colour, and Clare's letters were rather important. So they had not half said out their say, when the first dinner call was sounding in the barrack-square.

"What a bore !" Archbold ejaculated, as he glanced at the clock and pulled himself together for the effort of rising. "I shall be late for mess as it is ; and, though it's such a dreary drag, it would be a sin to waste an appetite."

"Why don't you take your chance here ?" Mrs. Clyde asked carelessly. "The larder's nearly empty, and the butcher's days are marked, like the festivals, in red letters ; else those good Macallisters should have dined here to-day instead of to-morrow. But we might make a sort of picnic of it, if you like. There's some soup, and some cold grouse pie, and some grilled ham, and sardines, and 'lashins' of potatoes."

His face brightened quite eagerly, and then grew grave again.

"I delight in picnics when I'm not obliged to feed on my knees and in the open air. But, do you think it would quite *do i*?"

Her eyes gleamed out, at once, defiantly. The very mention of conventionalities sufficed to stir the rebellious blood of this born Bohemian.

"You are really too considerate. Well, follow your conscience, by all means. I've much larger notions of the whole duty of cousins. Do you know, if Leonard had taken Marsh with him, I fully meant to ask you to come and sleep here, and take care of three unprotected females."

He bit his lip rather sharply. A man need be exceeding holy, exceeding wise, or exceeding old, before he can look complacently on the contrast between his own discretion and feminine daring.

"You're thoroughly right, and I deserve to fast for my clownishness; but I'd rather do penance some other time. My hunger has grown simply wolfish, since I heard the *menu*."

There are no social successes like these *impromptu* Agapæ; and this one was no exception to the rule. Throughout, the flow of talk never ceased or slackened: it was a shallow current, perhaps, bearing down with it no golden sands: nevertheless it rippled and sparkled on so merrily that Marsh, the stiff soldier-servant, waxed quite convivial and social, by dint of listening, and comprehending about one word in five. Indeed, at supper afterwards, in the kitchen, the worthy creature greatly startled his fellow-servants by certain ponderous quips and sallies which, issuing from his lips, had much the effect of spontaneous music from a rifle barrel.

Well: the dinner is over at last, and the hostess and her guest back in the drawing-room, and dallying over their black coffee—the one perfect luxury at Creggmore. It is a comfortable room enough since it lost its formal "company look," though, with that furniture, even Mariette could scarcely make it cozy; and quite sufficiently lighted by one large bay window, the sill of which is about breast-high from the ground without. The inner blinds are drawn down now, but neither shutters or curtains closed.

"And so," says Clare, between the puffs of his first cigarette, "the Knight of the Dolorous Blast actually did not

appear to-day? That's quite remarkable, and accounts for some of your brilliancy, Queen Emerald. Though what pleasure *can* he find in 'glooming' over against you for a set half hour, and then taking formal leave, without ever alluding to the burden of his soul, whatever that may be? People do take strange turns. I heard, quite lately, that one of my old comrades—there was not a cheerier creature in the whole Brigade—was found street-preaching. But this fantastic field-officer does puzzle me a good deal sometimes. Was he always just the same?"

She laughs rather consciously.

"Not quite the same. I've heard him talk sensibly and almost pleasantly. But that was in the old days when he was—well—rather master of the position here."

Clare begins to chant softly to himself—

" 'Forty times over let Michaelmas pass ;
Grizzling hair the brain doth clear.' "

He ought to have been safe, according to that rule. But I always suspected it must have been more or less of a 'case.' You cruel Emerald, were there no boys, or blocks, to practise on, that you must make sport of grey hairs?"

"I couldn't help it," she answers, demurely. "The place was so deadly dull and the others were so impossible. But it wasn't a 'case,' at all—as *you* understand it. Only he would have liked to play chaperon, I think, and to lecture me sometimes. Do you know, Clare, the very last time we had a real *tête-à-tête*, he wanted to warn me against—you."

He laughs in his turn, rather insolently. Youth, even when duteous towards its grandsire, has ever scant reverence for middle age.

"Of course he did. For disinterested advice and dispassionate counsel, commend me to an amorous elder. And you profited by the warning?"

The slightest shade of vexation flits across her face. Despite the pleasant freedom of their intercourse, perhaps her vanity had once or twice been chafed a little at seeing how completely, from the very first, Clare took her *camaraderie* as a matter of course.

"He meant well, at all events," she retorts pettishly—

“that’s something, in these days. And now begin to tell me about your letters. I don’t intend to keep you late here to-night.”

Instincts are uncertain things, after all. Whilst they are jesting thus lightly, nothing warns them of the evil presence near—very near. Nothing warns them, that only two thicknesses of glass and linen divide their faces from another face, black and writhen with passion, pressed hard against the window pane, in vain endeavouring to detect what is passing within.

It is even so. All his pride, and punctilious sense of honour, have not saved Evan Griffiths from the shame of base eavesdropping. Not an intelligible word reaches his ear; only the laughter he can hear quite plainly: and though the inner blind is of dark opaque stuff, it is slightly hitched aside, so that, when Archbold sways backward in his rocking-chair, his side face can be plainly discerned by the watcher without.

It was a terrible vigil; such an one as, even if things turned out happily afterwards, must needs leave furrows on the brow and scars on the heart of any living man. And yet, though every glimpse of the home-like comfort within sickened him with envy, though every ripple of laughter shot through him like a spasm of pain, Griffiths could no more have torn himself from the spot than, by the mere exertion of his will, he could have shaken off a nightmare.

He kept no account of time: but it seemed to him that he must have been watching very long; for his lower limbs felt stiff and numbed, when a faint shadow crossed the dark blind, and Mariette Clyde came for the first time within the scope of his espial. She moved round to the back of Archbold’s chair; and, resting her arms on the upper rail, swayed it back with her weight, so that his hair seemed almost to brush her cheek as she leaned forward over his shoulder.

In very truth, she was only reading a portion of the letter that Clare held open on his lap, covering half the page with his fingers. But the letter Griffiths could not see: he only saw the familiar *pose*, the apparently caressing gesture; and, as he looked, the sweat of mere agony broke out on his brow, and he sank down on his knees with a heavy groan.

Then, beyond doubt, like a rift of light from a furnace, a

gleam of the miserable truth shot athwart his mind or conscience. He knew now, of a surety, that it was not righteous indignation, or unselfish interest, that had brought him here to-night. He knew, now, that he would never have been so zealous in Mariette's cause if he had not coveted her for himself. And, with this consciousness, his fell purpose was rather embittered than abated. He did not, any longer, put away from him his shame ; but he was only the more bent on avenging himself on the man whom he accused of bringing him to this dishonour.

That faintness lasted for several minutes ; and, when he regained his feet, he turned away from the window without again glancing within : evidently he mistrusted his physical strength. Then, with a slow uncertain gait, staggering perceptibly at intervals, he made his way back to the gate, keeping in the shadow of the scattered evergreens, and so passed into the road.

From Creggmore to the town-end of Ballynane might have been some three-quarters of a mile ; and, for more than half this distance, the footpath ran under a high stone wall, not enclosing any particular demesne, but apparently erected with the good old Irish purpose of using up superfluous labour and material. In several places overhanging branches stretched far across the footway and made deep bays of shade even under the brightest moon.

In one of these dusky nooks Major Griffiths halted and stood still ; leaning his shoulders against the wall. The minutes dragged fearfully ; but he had not, in reality, waited more than half-an-hour, when, through the dead stillness, came the sound of a gate swinging to and fro on its hinges and the clatter of a latch hasping ; and Archbold came sauntering slowly on, humming to himself snatches of that same Jester's Song quoted above—not so well known then as now, for *Rebecca and Rowena* had only lately appeared.

Griffiths never stirred hand or foot till the other, utterly unconscious of his presence, had come almost within arm's length ; then he made a long stride forward, and stood right in the centre of the path. Nothing short of a natural phenomenon would, perhaps, have startled Clare Archbold ; but he was unquestionably very much surprised. His first

thought was, that he had to deal with a disaffected peasant in a state of pot-valiancy ; and he thought regretfully of a certain stout knotted black-thorn presently reposing in his whip-rack—he was literally and absolutely weaponless. But the next instant the outlines of the figure and the dress seemed familiar to him ; and though—following his original impulse—he stepped aside, so as to stand nearly clear of the shadow, his manner was listless as usual as he remarked—

“ It is the Major, then. May one ask what brings you out so late, Sir ? ”

The other was fain to clear his throat twice or thrice, and to moisten his parched lips, before the words would come, ever so huskily.

“ You cannot guess why I am here—you cannot guess what I have to say to you ? ”

Clair was not a whit disconcerted ; but he was so profoundly astonished, that he could only shake his head negatively.

“ You think the fruit is nearly ripe down there,” the other went on, in a grating uneven voice—“ so ripe, that it will soon drop into your hand ? You’re out in that reckoning, you’ll find. But it might have gone on a little longer, if you had acted otherwise to-night. This was your very first chance of compromising her—of making her name a mere regimental jest—and you *wouldn’t* let it pass. All this shall end—and quickly.”

He stopped, gasping from sheer lack of breath ; and Archbold answered in his quietest tone,—

“ I don’t understand your metaphor ; but I do understand that you object strongly to my having dined at Creggmore. I never knew before that Clyde’s presence or absence much affected the arrangements there ; but that’s beside the question. Your experience of the 120th is much longer than mine ; but my idea of the regimental chaff is not quite so low. That’s beside the question too. The real point is—I can’t suppose you’re acting officially, so I speak without fear of the Mutiny Act—by what possible right or title do you meddle in this matter at all ? ”

“ I was certain you’d say that,” the other snarled. “ What right ? The right that any man has to interfere, under whose

eyes base wrong is doing. Look you, I'll waste no words. You shall promise me—first, that you will not go to Creggmore again during Clyde's absence ; next, that you will break off your intimacy there, for the present, at least. You can go on leave, or make any pretext you like, I leave that to your choice. You will accept these conditions, or—the consequences."

"And is that all?" Clare responded, very meekly "When the conditions are so easy, it is hardly worth while talking of consequences."

"You will pass your word, then? Well—I suppose I'm bound to take it."

With the sullenness of Griffiths' manner mingled, surely, something akin to disappointment. There was a brief pause ; and then Archbold spoke in a sharp, decisive tone, so utterly at variance with his usual listlessness, that the other, even with the mad fit on him, noted the contrast.

"We've had fooling enough, and to spare. Could you seriously believe that I would take any orders on this subject from any human being besides the mistress, or possibly the master, of yonder house? Major Griffiths, if it costs me my commission, you will understand that I repel your interference as grossly impertinent. Further—that I am thoroughly aware how far it is disinterested. As to my future conduct, I refuse to fetter myself by the faintest shadow of a pledge. I wait to hear your alternative. A district court-martial, I suppose—with 'unbecoming' conduct on the charge-sheet, and yourself as prosecutor, and Clyde chief witness for the defence? The conception is bold, but full of merit."

With the first words, the Major's right hand stole into his breast and rested there. The shadow under which he stood was flecked here and there with tiny streaks of light ; and it was not so dark but that the gleaming of his teeth could be discerned, through the lips slowly retracted.

"A prayer would suit you better than a scoff," he said, almost in a whisper. "As God shall judge us both, I will take that promise from you to-night, to the letter ; or—I will take your life."

And, as his hand came slowly out of his breast, a stray moonbeam glimmered on clouded steel,

Constitutionally very fearless, Archbold had never yet stood face to face with deadly peril ; neither did he believe himself in such now. It did strike him as more than probable, that his antagonist's brain had somehow suddenly become distraught. But closing, with the view of wresting away his weapon, might provoke an involuntary pressure of the trigger : it was safest, perhaps, to treat the matter still lightly. If he had treated it calmly, things might possibly have gone otherwise : but, by evil chance, the quiet insolence, to which he was too prone, overmastered him.

"All melodrama is a mistake, I think. But military melodrama ——"

He turned away on his heel, laughing low.

Whilst that laughter was still on the air, came a sharp crack, then the dull sound of a bullet striking a live mark, and wheeling round in his tracks, so as almost to face his slayer, Clare Archbold crashed forwards without groan or cry—stone dead before his brow touched ground.





CHAPTER XXV.

IN CUSTODY.



FOR some seconds after his pistol-hand dropped to his side, Evan Griffiths stood stock still, staring at the grey curls of smoke floating betwixt him and the moon. But, before the last wreath had vanished, the clouds had lifted from his brain, leaving it quite clear. The consciousness that the last minute's work could neither be revoked nor amended, drove away the fever of his senses, as a plunge into ice-cold water banishes the fumes of strong wine ; and there came over him a sensation of refreshment and rest. He knew, of a surety, not only what he had done, but what he had to do. Very coolly and deliberately he knelt down beside the corpse, pressing his hand where the heart should beat ; but even muscular motion had ceased, and not the faintest quiver of life lingered in that mere heap of clay. The bullet, slanting upwards—Archbold was slightly the taller of the two—had penetrated the base of the skull, and of outward bleeding there was scarce any.

The murderer felt no horror of his own handiwork, nor any remorse as yet, nor any compassion. Nevertheless, he left the down-turned face as it lay ; only composing the flaccid limbs decently, till the old attitude resembled rather sleep than death. Then he rose up to his feet, glancing warily round to see if anyone was near. But the road was

still deserted, for the police patrol chanced to be at the furthest end of a long beat; and the natives within hearing—if such there were—were little likely to bestir themselves about a single pistol shot. After listening awhile, the major turned away and walked townwards—not hurriedly, but with the brisk short strides which he usually affected. It so happened that he encountered no one till he reached the barrack-gate, which was opened at his summons.

“Sergeant Fraser,” Griffiths said—standing well without the gate, and a little in shadow—“you will send out a corporal with a fatigue-party instantly. Mr. Archbold is lying on the footway, not far from the gate of Cregginmore, dangerously hurt—hurt to death. Let the Adjutant and Surgeon Macallister be warned at once. I shall be found at the police barrack.”

Those were the last, the very last, words of command that ever issued from Evan Griffiths’ lips; and more than one who heard them remembered afterwards, that they were delivered without a trace of flurry or embarrassment, in his usual precise authoritative tones. Without waiting further question, he motioned for the gate to be closed again, and strode away into the darkness.

When that truculent politician (whose name I have been at pains to forget) wished that a great tidal-wave might sweep over the length and breadth of the land from the Giant’s Causeway to Cape Clear, he must have made, I fancy, a slight reservation, and provided in his mind’s eye certain rafts, or arks of refuge, for the Constabulary.

Probably few Saxons have stronger Irish sympathies than the writer of these pages. Nevertheless, it must be owned that the “finest “ peasantry on earth,” in multitude and turbulence, are rather a trial to one’s temper. And when, deafened and dishevelled, you are struggling in the heart of such a press, is it not a comfort to find close to your elbow a neatly-shaven face, imperturbable yet intelligent withal, and a tall well-set-up figure, near which all those lithe, loose-limbed rioters look like mere *gossoons*? In the tracking of criminals they are certainly not fortunate—having, here, only slightly the advantage of British detectives; but in all other relations, whether public or private, whether on

or off duty, the force seems truly admirable. If these great creatures have a weakness, it is, perhaps, a mild jealousy of the regular army. This is chiefly evinced by a certain formality of manner towards the rank and file, and in an almost over-strained deference towards all commissioned officers.

In his own guard-room the major of the 120th would scarcely have been saluted so respectfully as he was on entering the police-barrack of Ballynane. Possibly he noted this, and the incongruity of that ceremony with his real position struck him; for something like a smile flickered round his lip, as he inquired for the inspector.

This official appeared without delay. He was a hale, hearty man—rather superior both in address and acquirements to the average of those holding the same grade; for, with little or no interest to back him, his promotion had been very slow.

“Can I see you alone for a few minutes, Mr. Donellan?” the major asked, with great composure.

The other assented courteously, and led the way into his private room, closing the door behind them. The interview was not a long one; but, before it was over, the men waiting without heard a sound as of a chair thrust back violently, and, directly afterwards, the inspector came forth alone—his jovial face looking pale and scared.

“Who is next for duty? You Meany? Go straight along the Derryclare road till you come to the gate of Creggmore, or meet a fatigue-party from the barracks. Then, return here at once, and report what you have heard or seen.”

With that the inspector turned back into his own room; and, once more shutting the door fast, fell to staring blankly at his companion, who sustained the scrutiny with unruffled calmness.

“Think over it again, major,” Donellan said, at last, rather beseechingly than warningly. “There were high words, of course; but was there not some kind of a scuffle, too? Triggers pull very light in such cases; though, why you should have drawn a pistol at all, beats me.”

“Not a pretence at a struggle,” the other answered decisively. “He was full five paces from me and his back was turned, when I shot him.”

The inspector took two or three turns through the room, before he spoke. "You cannot make homicide out of that," he muttered. "A plainer case of murder I never listened to." Then he said aloud in a more formal tone,— "I am sorry that I have no choice in this matter, Major Griffiths: you must consider yourself my prisoner. I am bound to hold you under surveillance; but the men shall watch outside, if you will give me your honour to remain perfectly quiet till I return. I understand, too, that you have no other arms besides this"—he took up the revolver lying on the table and thrust it into his own breast pocket—"I cannot act on my own responsibility here; and I am going to take the orders of the nearest magistrate. Mr. Nisbet, I know, is in Ballynane to-night."

"You have my parole," the other replied. "If the adjutant of my — of the 120th—should come down, may I be allowed to see him? It will only be on official matters; and one of your men can be present, if you choose."

"That will not be necessary," Donellan said. "Your parole will quite suffice—for the present."

So the inspector went his way. He did not, however, go straight to the magistrate; but, after giving the necessary orders, walked away towards Creggmore. Before he reached the barrack gate, he met the constable hurrying back to report that he had overtaken the fatigue-party and accompanied them till they came on the corpse, lying just as Griffiths had described.

There was no further excuse for hesitation or delay, and the inspector dallied no longer with his manifest duty. Still he could not get rid of a certain reluctance and compunction. Thus far, he had heard nothing that could either explain or palliate the crime; nevertheless, he could not bring himself to look on Evan Griffiths as a common murderer. Some secret influence, or covert provocation, must, he thought, lie somewhere in the background, and would, perchance, abide unrevealed to the very end. In his busy life, Donellan found little time to waste on gossip, civil or military. Yet he did, just then, remember that the mistress of Creggmore was exceedingly fair; and if the old question—*Dove la donna?*—had been put to him in honest

English, he would not, perhaps, have puzzled long over the answer.

Within half-an-hour or so, Lester, the adjutant, came down to the police barrack, and was allowed to see the prisoner alone. The first news of the catastrophe had shocked him intensely; but, having once realised it, his suspicions went straight and swift to the right mark, and he was scarcely surprised to find his superior in custody; though he was surprised at hearing of the voluntary surrender. The good fellow was full of contrition and self-reproach, for having abandoned his intention of walking down early in the morning to Creggmore: indeed, he said as much to Major Griffiths. The other shook his head negatively.

"You might have delayed it," he said; "but—*it was to be.*"

There was a dreamy look in his eyes as he uttered those last words, very different from their usually keen restlessness. Beyond doubt, predestination, in its gloomiest form, entered largely into this man's strange creed; and he looked upon himself as an instrument to a great degree irresponsible, albeit amenable to human laws. Neither argument nor entreaty could induce him in any wise to explain his conduct. He averred that Archbold's language had been grossly insolent; but, when asked why he did not seek redress according to the Articles of War, he only answered that "There were words and things beyond the cognisance even of courts-martial;" and then locked up his lips so resolutely, that Lester forbore to press him further.

Then the major went into divers matters of official routine. If he had taken three days' leave of absence, he could not have explained himself more coolly and lucidly the minutest details necessary to be known by the senior captain who was to take over the regiment till the chief should return. This done, he manifested a decided wish to be left alone; peremptorily refusing, for the present, to see any of his brother officers on any pretext whatsoever. He would not even make an exception in favour of the surgeon, from whom Lester was charged with a special message.

The adjutant had not long departed in great discontent, when Donellan returned from his interview with the

magistrate. The latter was so impressed with the gravity of the case, that he had at first suggested the immediate transfer of the prisoner to the town gaol ; but, eventually, consented to leave the inspector responsible for his safe custody till the morrow. When all this was communicated to the major, he seemed sensible of the consideration shown him, but betrayed no further interest in the matter. A good-natured hint of Donellan's, to the effect that it would be well to avail himself of legal assistance in his examination before the magistrates, he met with a point-blank refusal and also declined all offers of refreshment. Throughout the night he was left undisturbed ; and, when the inspector entered the room, some hours after daybreak, he found his prisoner lying fully dressed on the camp-bed in a heavy slumber.

Not many others, perhaps, in Ballynane, cognisant of the deed wrought over-night, rested so peacefully. In the barracks, especially, there was much wakefulness. Ill news travels not only fast but subtly ; and, long before midnight, the black story had spread far beyond the officers' quarters. As a rule, in time of peace, few things unconnected with drill rations, or furlough, deeply move the British private ; but, for once, the consternation was general. Clare Archbold had been much more of a favourite with the rank and file and non-commissioned officers than with his comrades ; and, though it was the fashion to grumble at Griffiths' severities, the large majority—setting aside incorrigible drunkards or defaulters—admired him after a fashion, and acknowledged his honesty of purpose.

The sky was grey before the murmur of comment and conjecture ceased in some of the barrack rooms ; and, during the night, more than one restless sleeper rose from his pallet to watch a dull red light streaming from a curtained window on the opposite side of the square. For all knew that yonder lamp was shining down on eyelids that never more would discern darkness from day—the eyelids of a foully-murdered man.



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DEAD MAN'S LETTERS.

THE fatal pistol-shot had not been heard at Creggmore, and the ill tidings were not brought thither before the following morning. Mariette, though a sound, was a very light sleeper; and, as she woke much earlier than her wont, she was aware of whispered talk, broken by frequent sobbing, outside her chamber door. It was the Irish cook making her moan, after the impulsive fashion of her countrywomen. The English maid, though somewhat more coherent, was hovering on the verge of hysterics; so that it was some time before Mrs. Clyde could discover exactly what had happened. When she did realise it, she went back into her room again, and, locking the door behind her, sate down to think.

Her face was paler than when she stood at her dead father's side, on the morning of her wedding day; but now, as then, her eyes were tearless. She had been honest—marvellously honest for *her*—in her past dealings with Clare Archbold; and, beyond question, she was honest, too, in her present sorrowing. Strive as she would—she could not, for a while, bring herself to believe that the soft, slow voice, so familiar to her ears of late, would never whisper nor murmur more. Their intercourse had been so facile and genial, that in the disastrous end she was sensible of some

horrible incongruity ; like a spectator who sees a light-minded comedy merge into a grim catastrophe.

With temperaments like hers, a wrathful impulse generally follows the first sting of grief ; and many such persons, before they even think of consolation, bethink themselves of vengeance. As she sate there brooding alone, Mariette felt that she loathed and hated Evan Griffiths more intensely than she had thought it possible to loath or hate any created being. Nevertheless, even when her wrath burned most fiercely, she was able to recognise that not all the blame rested on him. If she had not begun to enthrall and beguile this man for her sport, things would surely have gone otherwise ; and, if the event lay far beyond human foresight, she was not therefore wholly free of blood-guiltiness. If, by a gesture, then or afterwards, she could have decided the murderer's fate, she would have given the death-signal, with no more remorse than Faustina knew, dooming a crippled Secutor. Yet, thinking of him now in his changed estate—thinking on the black and utter ruin of a life's fair repute—thinking on what he must have endured before yielding to that last desperate temptation—she could not refuse some vague compassion.

But it was not her wont to muse long over the past, whether bright or gloomy ; and, very soon, the conviction struck her that there was something she ought to do, and do quickly.

She dressed herself with no unusual haste, not answering,—seemingly scarcely heeding—her maid's frightened comments and conjectures ; and, after swallowing one cup of black coffee, went out alone.

If Mariette had entered the barrack square, quite ignorant of the events of the past night, she would have guessed that something was gravely amiss. It was very evident that all the regimental mechanism had, for the moment, come to a standstill. There were no squads of recruits drilling—no busy sergeants hurrying to and fro—no loungers at the window of the ante-room, or round the steps of the officers' quarters ; but knots of the private soldiery, all in undress, were gathered here and there, talking under their breath eagerly.

From one of these groups Mrs. Clyde learned that the

surgeon was then going his morning rounds, out was certain soon to be at liberty; almost immediately, indeed, Macallister emerged from the hospital-block, and crossed the square to where Mariette was standing. Before he could speak, she beckoned him to follow her through the gates; and, for fully a quarter-of-an-hour, they paced to and fro under the barrack walls in earnest talk. It was clear that Mariette was bent on carrying some point, to which the other would by no means accede. His rough-hewn face looked "dourer" than usual this morning, and would have silenced most feminine pleaders. But Mariette was not to be discouraged; and, foot by foot, she gained ground till at last, with a very ill grace, her opponent was fain to surrender at discretion.

Now, when this sturdy Scotchman had once accepted a disagreeable necessity, his one idea was to "get through with it" as promptly as possible; and Mrs. Clyde, though very light of foot, had some difficulty in keeping pace with him, as he strode across the barrack square, and mounted the staircase leading to a certain room, the curtains of which were still closely drawn.

On the landing outside the door Archbold's soldier-servant was sitting: he rose up and saluted the visitors silently, and fell back to let them pass. Silently, too, Macallister turned the key in the lock, and motioned his companion to enter first. When they were both inside, he closed the door carefully, and made it fast by shooting a small bolt, muttering to himself the while.

On a camp-bed lay the corpse of Clare Archbold, in the dress in which he was slain; the hands—scarcely whiter than they had been in life—were folded across the breast, and the face was covered with a kerchief. In the rest of the barrack room nothing had been disturbed; on the dressing-table lay the great ivory brushes, just as they had been flung carelessly down; on the centre table, amongst other costly trifles, a cigar-case, worked in the old Brigade colours, lay open; and on the lounging-chair was a French novel, a paper-knife protruding from the half-cut leaves.

All these things Mariette took in at a glance, as she stepped up softly to the couch and lifted the kerchief with a light firm hand. In truth, weaker nerves than hers need

not have been startled by what she saw. Many men, in sleep, wear countenances less peaceful than did this man in death. The wound, of course, was hidden ; and only by a slight shrinking of the eyelids, a faint contraction round the nostrils, and from the fixed lines of the lips, could it be known of a surety that the "mortal had put on immortality." For more than a minute, Mrs. Clyde stood gazing down stedfastly. Then, without turning her head, she beckoned to Macallister to draw nearer, and when he came close, laid her finger on the corpse's breast, saying—

"It is there."

The other frowned heavily, as he answered in his gruffest tone—

"I'll have no hand in it. I doubt it's clean against my duty to have brought you here at all ; but I'll neither make nor meddle further."

Although her lip did not curl, her eyes gleamed scornfully ; but the next instant they softened, as she bent over the corpse, and thrust her fingers into a breast-pocket, and drew out a thick square letter. This she held out for Macallister's inspection.

"You will recognise the writing again?"

The other nodded, without speaking. Clare's watch lay on the table near : on the chain were only two trinkets—a locket bearing a cross in brilliants, and a small gold key, likewise cruciform. With this last, Mariette unlocked a despatch box, and began to search through the papers it contained. Most of these she put back in their places after once glancing at them, though at some few she looked more narrowly : only in the last compartment—a kind of false lid, opening with a spring—she found what she sought. There were many letters here ; some in packets—some, evidently of recent date, lying loose ; but the superscription of all was the same, and matched exactly with the letter still in Mariette's hand.

Despite his manifest reluctance, she induced Macallister to verify this, and then piled them up in the grate, in which were only a few black cinders. There were matches in plenty, however, on the mantel ; and, as Mariette knelt down to set fire to the papers, she glanced up at her companion.

"You *know* I'm right," she said.

And, though the other's countenance was still heavy with discontent, he could not gainsay her. Kneeling there, she watched the flame till it flickered down and sank into a heap of light grey ashes. Then she rose to her feet, and, after locking the despatch-box carefully, once more approached the couch. Once more, too, she stooped; and, whilst she laid her warm red lips on the cold white forehead, Macallister heard her whisper very low—

"Good-bye, Clare! I have done my very best for you, and for—*her*."

As she drew back, she replaced the kerchief, saying, in a steady voice,—

"Let us go, now. Some other time I will thank you."

At the foot of the stairs they parted, each going their several way.

The day ensuing was assuredly drearier than any Mariette had yet known. If Clare Archbold had departed for only a short absence, she would, just then, have missed him terribly; and, perhaps till now, she never realised how solitary her life had been till they met. Even when the loss does not come very home to us, the violent removal of any familiar presence must needs disturb our moral balance; and, for the time, philosophy is apt to be at a discount. Possibly, too, Mariette foresaw some further troubles ahead; at any rate, her first act, after reaching home again, was to write to Harradine, mentioning briefly what had occurred, and bidding him come to her speedily. If there were no other reason for desiring Pete's presence, she felt that to be left quite alone with Leonard, and to be forced to listen to, if not to answer, his questions and surmises, would be simply intolerable.

In the course of the day, a brief formal note from Macallister informed her of the result of the examination before the magistrates. This had terminated just as might have been expected. Donellan's suggestion of legal advice was prompted not only by good nature, but by sound good sense. Though it would have been impossible to resist a remand, or conviction for manslaughter, a sharp country attorney might have made a strong fight for the defence.

It would have been easy to prove that the carrying of arms after nightfall was a matter of prudence, if not of necessity—easy, also, to point out the gross improbability of animosity subsisting betwixt officers of such widely different grades : if any grudge had been borne, it would have been surely by the subaltern, for some real or fancied oppression on the part of his superior. There was absolutely nothing to show that, either on or off duty, the slightest ill-feeling had arisen betwixt the slain and the slayer—much less that any word that could be construed into a menace had ever issued from the latter's lips. Looking at the collateral evidence, it seemed fairly likely that the two, having encountered by chance, had come, somehow, to high words ; and that the major, stung beyond endurance by insolent language, or mutinous gesture, had taken the law into his own hands, with fatal effect. If two or three there present were under a different impression, and surmised that neither the carrying of the weapon nor the meeting were quite so fortuitous, it was not likely that they would have avowed a mere vague suspicion—much less testify to the same on oath.

But all these possible extenuations remained in the background, and the magistrates had only to deal with the prisoner's own confession. This, in substance, was identical with his statement made at the police barracks, and he furnished no further details. Admitting there had been an altercation—he utterly declined to explain the origin or grounds thereof. He did not for a moment imply that he had used his weapon in self-defence ; but asserted that, before firing, he had given Clare Archbold fair warning, and that the latter had repeated a verbal offence deliberately. He averred the meeting to have been accidental ; and accounted for his own presence there by saying that, feeling heated and feverish, he had gone forth, as he had often done before, for a stroll in the night air. All further questions he met with an obstinate silence. There was nothing in the man's antecedents (Surgeon Macallister was examined on this point) or present demeanour, to warrant any assumption of insanity ; and the verdict of rather a full bench was naturally unanimous.

Evan Griffiths was committed to Ballynane gaol on the charge of wilful murder,



CHAPTER XXVII.

A STRANGE REQUEST

THESE incidents were more than a nine days wonder in places where, till now, the very existence of Ballynane had been ignored; and you may guess what manner of sensation they caused throughout the country-side. When, on the day following, the news reached the county town whither Barrington's detachment had proceeded, the buzz of excitement drowned the voice of faction, and the dreaded election passed off quite tamely. Ballynane itself naturally continued to be the centre-point of curiosity, and the fountain-head of rumours. Every other morning, some fresh report gained currency, and, before night, was contradicted authoritatively; albeit the "authority" never, by any chance, was defined.

In the course of the week ensuing on Evan Griffiths' committal, besides Harradine—of whom more hereafter—two strangers appeared in Ballynane.

The first was a London solicitor, bearing credentials from General Sir Richard Archbold, K.C.B., the uncle from whom poor Clare had had expectations. His duties were very short and simple; for there were no debts of any importance to be settled, and all the personal effects were easily collected and removed.

About the other stranger there was rather more mystery;

for, though he admitted being related to Griffiths (he bore the same surname) he was very reserved as to the degree of consanguinity, and likewise as to his own profession or calling. With the nearest magistrate he was probably more explicit; for he obtained, at once, a general order of admission to the gaol, and was allowed free access to the prisoner. The result of these interviews did not seem very satisfactory; for the warder who patrolled in the corridor without, though he abstained from eavesdropping, was aware that the debate sometimes waxed hot; and the visitor invariably came forth with a heavier cloud on his face, which was by nature sufficiently sad and sour.

On a certain afternoon, however, there were no raised voices within the cell—only a murmur of talk, sometimes sinking into a whisper, and ending in long silence. The warder then on duty was not a very observant person; yet he did remark, and remembered afterwards, that the visitor looked strangely pale, and kept his head so bowed on his breast as he went out, that it was impossible to catch his eye. James Griffiths came to the gaol no more, and departed from Ballynane that same evening. It was bruited abroad afterwards that he was in Holy Orders, and that his kinsmanship with the prisoner was neither more nor less than brotherhood; and, mayhap, for once, rumour was not very wide of the truth. But the certainty never was known; for, had there been no other reason for his silence, family pride would have kept Evan Griffiths' lips sealed; and the magistrate who signed the aforesaid order—a person of punctilious honour—kept his knowledge, or his suspicions, entirely to himself.

In those days prison discipline, especially in the remoter provinces, was rather less rigid than it had become of late. The Governor of Ballynane gaol, if he did not exactly sympathise with his chief prisoner, pitied him certainly in no small degree; and, without actually outstepping his duty, did all in his power to lighten the gloom of the house of bondage. Major Griffiths was allowed to provide himself with changes of apparel, books, and writing materials without stint; and it was further intimated to him, that if he wished for brief conference with any of his brother officers, the Governor would sanction this on his own responsibility. Of this indulgence,

however, the major seemed in no wise inclined to avail himself.

Of all those who came, so to speak, within the shadow of Evan Griffiths' disgrace, not one was more thoroughly shocked and bewildered than the chief of the 120th. Colonel Daveney was a mild, easy-going veteran; in the course of his long, uneventful service he had, perhaps, never been brought actually in contact with a crime beyond the cognisance of a court-martial; he had got his company in the corps that he now commanded, and, since then, if the regiment, through lack of opportunity, had gathered few laurels, nothing certainly had occurred to tarnish its reputation. That an officer of Griffiths' standing, and unblemished character—a strict disciplinarian to boot—should have plunged headlong into such an abyss of guilt, seemed to the good colonel a portent so gross and unnatural, that he fell back on insanity as the only possible solution of the riddle. From this fixed idea he never varied, and, for a long time afterwards, was wont to ransack Annual Registers, and similar records, for parallel cases; till at last, on the materials he collected might have been founded an exhaustive treatise on homicidal mania. In his convictions there was no room for doubt; and, when Colonel Daveney earnestly desired to come face to face with his unhappy comrade, it was less with the view of confirming his own impressions, than in the honest hope that he would be able to detect such clear signs of wandering intellect as might satisfy a jury. But all his overtures met with obstinate, though not ungracious rejection.

Indeed, for more than a fortnight after his kinsman's departure, none, except the prison officials, broke in on Evan Griffiths' solitude. One morning, however, he somewhat abruptly signified a wish to see Macallister. What passed at that interview was never accurately known; for all questioning on the subject—even from his own helpmate—the surgeon checked so sternly, that the catechising was not likely to be repeated; but that he went forth charged with some distasteful mission, might have been guessed, partly from his visage, partly from his subsequent proceedings.

They were altered times now at Creggmore. Though, perhaps, no one was uncharitable enough to hold Mrs.

Clyde accountable, even in a remote degree, for what had happened, an impression began to prevail that there was something unlucky—to say the least of it—in her influences; and some of the subalterns especially, whilst they gave the house a wide berth, watched it from afar with a fearful curiosity. Even so the vassals of Glamis may have watched the donjon wherein, as rumour would have it, the beautiful witch-wife sat busy over her enchantments.

This feeling of distrust must need have been augmented by Leonard's Clyde's own demeanour. From the very evening that he returned with his detachment, a change had come over him, and decidedly a change for the worse. He hardly ever indulged in fits of sullenness—never in outbreaks of temper; but maundered about in a helpless stupified fashion, and when off duty, seldom seemed perfectly sober. But the worse symptom was that, even when primed with liquor, he never ventured to look Mariette fairly in the face, and would seize on any futile pretext rather than remain long alone in her company. She herself did not seem to notice this, yet it was notable enough to be discussed not only by Leonard's comrades in barracks, but by the servants at Creggmore.

The afternoon teas had quite come to an end; and, though each and everyone of the *habitués* still presented himself occasionally, the visits were manifestly formal, and as brief as was consistent with courtesy. The fact was, that the least imaginative of them was sensible of something funereal in the atmosphere: a certain chair seemed always haunted by a dead man's presence; whilst another held the *spectrum* of a man, living still, yet, perchance, worse than dead.

Of this last change Mrs. Clyde was undoubtedly aware; but it troubled her very little, if it did not actually march with her wishes. When weary of her own company, she could always fall back on Harradine's; and, from mere habit, she was quite content with this.

Leonard's greeting of this guest was the reverse of hospitable; but Pete was not a whit affronted or disconcerted. He had obeyed Mariette's summons with all possible speed, and he was there to serve her, so long as she had need of his services; the fashion of her husband's

welcome was a mere incident, quite beside the main question. Nevertheless, Pete was not minded to accept the position blindfold; and, on the very evening of his arrival, there had been rather a stormy explanation in which Mariette could not, as she had been wont, carry matters with a high hand.

Harradine had, as you are aware, from the very first, boded ill of this marriage; but these grave complications were utterly out of his reckoning, and he plainly now suspected the very worst. Mariette's rebellious temper nearly led her astray. But, at last, she took the only wise and safe course, and told the truth—the whole truth. Had he been more used to distrust her, he would have been convinced; and, in his penitence for having misjudged her, Pete rather overshot the mark. But Mariette only laughed bitterly.

“‘Honesty's the best policy,’ they say. Now, if I had been worse—ten times worse—than you suspected, could there have been a worse ending?”

The other had no answer ready: indeed, his ethics were of the simplest and scantiest, and, if they sufficed his own needs, were by no means equal to controversy.

Among those who still kept up the form of visiting at Creggmore, the surgeon of the 120th was not to be reckoned. Indeed, he had scarcely interchanged a word with Mrs. Clyde, since they parted at the foot of the stair leading to Clare Archbold's quarters. Therefore, she was somewhat surprised at hearing him announced one forenoon: she was alone, as it chanced; for Leonard was engaged in barracks, and Harradine had gone forth for a sharp constitutional. Macallister was evidently in no mood for conventionalities, and came straight to his point, without preface or apology.

“I am here on very disagreeable business, Mrs. Clyde. Indeed, I should never have undertaken it, if I did not hold it a bounden duty to leave no stone unturned in this miserable matter which may hide the truth. But, before I go further, will you engage to consult your husband, and not to act without his leave? It is only on this condition that I will speak another word.”

Had Mariette been in laughing mood, the notion of

Leonard's sudden acquisition of authority would have tried her gravity : as it was, the other's tone—imperative, if not absolutely hostile—chafed her not a little, and she frowned as she answered,

"Certainly, I will give you that promise ; though I cannot guess why you require it."

He nodded his head, as if noting the acceptance of his conditions, and went on in the same hard formal tone.

"Then I may deliver my message. I saw Evan Griffiths this morning, at his own request. I do not know if you are aware that we have been comrades for more than twenty years. When he asked one thing of me, for the sake of old times—one thing only—I could not deny him. Therefore, I am here to ask if—with your husband's sanction—you will visit him alone in his cell to-day."

She had great command of countenance ; yet it betrayed then aversion stronger than surprise. Macallister marked this, and shook his head ruefully.

"It is a hard thing, I know," he said ; "so hard—that from most women I should scruple to ask it. But I have seen your nerves tried before this ; and, with you, it will be a mere question of charity."

Every trace of discomposure had vanished from Mariette's face, as she looked up and met his eyes steadily.

"Leonard will be home in an hour," she said ; "so I shall have time to think over this, before I consult him. If you will come back any time after one o'clock, you shall have your answer."

The surgeon rose quickly, evidently relieved at having so far discharged his mission.

"So be it, then," he said. "Remember, I have not meant to influence you. If you need my services, I am ready to escort you to and from the gaol."

Having fully decided on her course of action, Mariette referred the matter to her husband in due form. In Leonard's lack-lustre eyes shone a faint astonishment ; but the occasion of his being consulted evidently surprised him less than the fact of his being consulted at all. He gave his consent, of course, and the only thing that seemed to vex him was the necessity of keeping the matter to himself, when he would have preferred discussing it over many

brandies and sodas with Streatfield, and one or two more assessors. But Macallister, when he returned, without giving his reasons, pressed this point strongly, and, before he departed with Mariette, had exacted from Clyde an explicit pledge of silence. The gaol authorities had evidently been prepared for the visit; for after exchanging a word or two with the warden on duty at the gate, the surgeon and his companion passed on without hindrance into the upper corridor. There, the door of a certain cell was unlocked again, and Mariette was left alone with its tenant.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

IN THE GAOL.

AT first sight, Evan Griffiths seemed little changed. In his dress and general appearance there were no signs of squalor or neglect; his hair and beard were trimmed in precise, soldierly pattern, and his features were not much sharper in their outline. But, looking closer, you would have seen that the skin round the temples was tensely drawn, his cheeks had lost their healthy colour, and in the keen, black eyes there was the fever that comes only from long sleepless night-watches. His hand, too, shook as he drew forward a chair—the solitary one—for his visitor, with his old, rather laboured, courtesy.

For a minute or two both were silent. Then Griffiths spoke in a slow, constrained voice.

“It is very kind of you to come: I scarcely reckoned on it.”

If Mariette at that moment felt either charity or compassion, she certainly dissembled right well.

“I do not know that I come in kindness,” she said. “Is it not enough that I am here, and ready to listen?”

He shrank back against the wall, where he stood wincing perceptibly. He had not looked for much softness or indulgence; yet, perchance, he had looked for something a

little less coldly repellant. He answered, however, with exceeding calmness :

"Quite enough. If you will only listen patiently, and try to believe that I would not willingly insult or offend you, it will more than content me. If you would try to understand, too, that you are listening to a man whose days are numbered as if he had been given up by the physicians, it will make it easier for me to speak. Hush, pray," he went on hurriedly—seeing that she was about to interrupt him—"I know what you would say about the chances of the law. Indeed, there is no question of these here. I had no doubts awhile ago ; but I have been troubled with many of late—he drew his hand wearily across his brow—it is because I wish to die with my mind, if not my conscience, clear, that I asked you to come here to-day, and that I ask you this question now. Do you know why I took Clare Archbold's life?"

Mariette was so far forearmed that even this point-blank attack took her not wholly unawares.

"I know nothing," she replied; "but I can guess that you were prejudiced against him from the very first, and that prejudice grew into enmity, till, on that miserable night, some word fell like a spark on powder, and brought about all this ruin. Yes: I can guess something more—it is too late for mock-modesty now—I can guess that you were jealous of him for engrossing too much of my society, and usurping your place at Creggmore ; and if it was so, was a mere affront to your vanity worth such a revenge? Major Griffiths, on that night you *cannot* have been sane."

He drew himself up with a certain dignity.

"So others say. But I have put aside that plea as I would put aside any other deliberate lie. But you make another mistake. My vanity had nothing to do with it. If I had only believed that Clare Archbold meant honestly, he might have kept his place for ever for me."

"If he had meant honestly! What told you that he meant otherwise?"

"I knew the man and his repute," Griffiths answered. "Was not that enough?"

"Cannot you speak the whole truth?" she said, scornfully, "and confess that you mistrusted me not less than

you mistrusted him? You had heard something of my past, and my present life you could see; and you thought that Arthur Locksley's daughter and Leonard Clyde's wife was fair game for any hawk to fly at. Well—perhaps you had reason."

"It was not so," he broke in with a fierce eagerness. "I never did you that wrong. Knowing you were innocent, I wished to keep you so. Besides, there may be dishonour without sin."

Now, for the first time, her eyes sought out his resolutely; and a cruel sarcasm played round her lips.

"And your anxiety was quite disinterested?"

He did not answer for a while; but, as his head sank slowly forward, he flushed dark red to the very brow.

"I believed so," he said at last, in a low, broken voice; "I believed so up to that very night. Then I knew I had fooled myself; but it was—too late—I had seen."

Mariette started to her feet in passionate anger. But even at that bitter moment she did forego one advantage, and was satisfied with a half confession.

"You had seen," she repeated, "when you played spy; you had better have played listener too: it might have saved two lives. You have had doubts of late, you say; it shall not be my fault if you doubt any longer. You *must* believe, because you *can't* think that I would lie to you now. I tell you that, from the hour we met to the hour we parted, Clare Archbold never said one word to me that he might not have said to his own sister, except that he would scarcely have taken a sister into all his confidences. He did love another woman with all his heart, and soul, and strength. To talk to me of her was his one great happiness. On that last night I read part of her last letter—perhaps you watched me as I did so—I took that letter out of his breast the next morning, when he lay stiff and cold, and burned it with all the others, whilst the man who brought me here stood by. It was the one pleasant companionship of all my life; it might have lasted just a little longer. But—knowing Clare Archbold thoroughly—of course you acted for the best."

Though her heart was hardened against him, Mariette would have recalled that last taunt, as she saw Evan

Griffiths sink down on the prison-pallet beside him, covering his face, as though a sudden light had blinded him. Albeit his mind, of late, had been so warped and distorted, a sense of justice abode with him still, and for the moment he forgot his own wretched case, in the fullness of his self-condemnation. On other counts, the man who died by his hand might doubtless be arraigned. But, whenever this cause should be tried, the whole guilt of thought, not less than of deed, must rest on himself alone. As he sat there, shrunk and bowed together, he looked so pitifully depressed and despondent, that Mariette's wrath was abated. She would not have been a woman, either, if she had not discovered some shade of excuse for a crime instigated, partly, at least, by misguided devotion to herself.

"I had no right to speak so harshly," she said, "for you never meant to injure me. I miss poor Clare as a kind friend—nothing more. *You* were kind and friendly to me once, too—I remember that. I do not know if I have much to forgive; but if you care to hear me say—'I forgive you' I can say it now, freely."

He straightened himself up, like one suddenly relieved from a weight of fetters; but he shrunk back from her proffered hand.

"Not *that*," he said—"not *that*—ever again, from you or any other. But you have made me strong again—strong enough to endure to the end—to the end."

He dwelt on those last syllables, as though they had suggested some distant train of thought; and there was a pause before either spoke again.

"Is there nothing I can do for you?" Mariette asked at last.

The other looked up with a slight start, as though rousing himself from a reverie.

"There is—something," he said, with some hesitation. "I would not ask it of you; but there is no one else who can help me so well. There is a small packet lying in Dublin now, at an address that I can furnish you with. It is not directed to me; but it will be given up to the bearer of a note that I have ready here. If you could by any means get possession of this, and bring it to me here, you would do me the very greatest kindness."

"It will not be difficult," Mariette answered, readily. "The oldest friend I have—one whom I have known since my childhood—is staying with me now. I can trust him as I would myself. He shall bring your packet back from Dublin to-morrow, and I will place it in your hands the following day."

She had scarcely time to receive the credentials and a few necessary instructions, when a knock at the cell door warned Mariette that it was time to depart. Macallister was waiting for her in the corridor without, and left her at the gate of Cregmore.

It was characteristic of the two that neither question nor remark, bearing on the interview just concluded, passed betwixt them. Only, just before they parted, Mariette observed :

"I shall have to go there once again—probably the day after to-morrow—can you manage this?"

To which the surgeon replied that "He would see about it ;" thereby signifying acquiescence without approval.





CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PACKET.

CONSIDERING its area and population, Ireland has certainly contributed, both to civil and criminal jurisprudence, much beyond her quota of *causes célèbres*. As the age waxes more prosaic, these naturally wax rarer ; but one of the old stamp still crops up occasionally. And after the old fashion, such a stir of interest and expectation thrills through the length and breadth of the land, as we cold-blooded Saxons can scarce comprehend.

These winter assizes were looked forward to by high and low with feverish curiosity. On market-days in Ballynane, the open space in front of the gaol was always thronged with the country folk, who seemed to find quite sufficient attraction in the very walls enclosing the famous criminal the measure of their content was filled up if the wicket-door, standing ajar for a second, gave them a glimpse of the courtyard within. There was a profound sensation in the town when it was reported that a Dublin attorney, of great repute in grave criminal cases, had come down to collect materials for the defence. It was not known by whom he had been retained ; but, evidently, it was not by Griffiths himself, with whom the lawyer had but one brief interview, bearing anything but satisfactory results. Soon a rumour gained ground that—with or without the prisoner's consent—the plea of

insanity would be set up. Not without reason; for the attorney's inquiries and researches all, more or less, bore upon this point.

At the first suggestion of this, discontent spread far and near. And not the commonalty alone were disposed to murmur. That an inquiry so full of interest and incident, likely to bring out so many lights and shades, both of civil and military life, should resolve itself into a mere question for the mad doctors, was, in truth, a disappointment hard to be borne, and no wonder that the public growled by anticipation, like a mastiff cheated of a well-earned meal.

All these matters were anterior in date to those recorded in the last chapter, and if any rumours from without had penetrated Evan Griffiths' cell, they evidently touched him but lightly; for he did not even think them worth alluding to in his talk with Mariette.

When, on the morning after that same interview, the governor went his rounds, he found his chief prisoner looking so unusually wan and worn that he was fain to suggest a visit from the gaol surgeon. Somewhat to his surprise, the proposition was accepted readily.

In the consultation ensuing, Griffiths admitted that he had for years past suffered from palpitations and other symptoms of irregular action of the heart, and that these had been more marked and severe, of late. Also, he owned to a sharp attack during the past night, which, though it lasted not many seconds, had left him strangely weak and ill. The surgeon looked grave and talked gravely, to boot, insisting on the necessity of certain remedies, and also on more regular exercise in the open air of the court-yard. These directions the patient professed himself ready to obey.

But, an hour later, the doctor confided to his chief that Even Griffiths might possibly escape from justice on a surer plea than insanity.

"It's all guess work in these cases," he remarked. "But less excitement than he's bound to go through is often fatal. If the verdict is 'wilful murder,' I think he is just as likely to die in the dock as on the scaffold."

Harradine had been sent on more than one delicate embassy in his time, and was, indeed, admirably constituted for a special messenger. Having once got his orders, he would

carry them out to the best of his intelligence and power ; but as to the ultimate purport or result of his errand, he was no more curious than the stout Knight of Deloraine, when he rode from Branksome to Melrose.

Nevertheless, Pete's face wore rather a dubious and puzzled expression when he returned from Dublin late at night, having fully accomplished his mission.

"It's a queer start altogether," he remarked to Mariette when they were alone together. "The place itself wasn't easy to find, for the carman—he wasn't a fool either—had never heard of the street. And when I asked "if Mr. Foster was at home," the man of the house grinned and said—"The devil doubt him! He ain't been outside the doors since the blessed minute he came in." And Foster himself was a queer one to look at—a sly, sleek beggar ; a sort of cross between a Methodist parson and a billiard-marker. He burned the note after just glancing at it, and, as soon as he had handed over the parcel, seemed in a regular fidget to get rid of me. I went away then ; but after I'd lunched, when I found I'd time to spare, I thought I'd have another look at him, and went back to offer him a receipt. He was gone ; and I found he'd paid his bill and cleared out, bag and baggage, within ten minutes after I'd left. It's a case of *anguille sous roche*—as the poor Captain used to say—depend upon it."

Mariette did not answer for a while ; she was looking at the square packet lying on the table betwixt them, as if it had been some intricate mechanical puzzle. It was an innocent-looking object enough ; a tiny square box—wooden, apparently, by the weight—enclosed in many wrappings of brown paper ; the outer cover bore no postal marks, and only the address in a formal, clerkly hand—

MR. FOSTER,
Dublin.

However, if Mariette had any suspicions, she did not choose to confide them even to her trusty friend and counsellor.

"It does sound mysterious," she said, carelessly ; "but I

do not believe there's any real mystery in it. It may be some old family relic or jewel that he wants to look at again—possibly to destroy; and he doesn't want it officially examined, as it must have been if it had come to the prison through any regular channel."

The shake of Pete's head was both incredulous and warning.

"There's only one in it, as far as I'm concerned, and that's you, Missy. It ain't much use my preaching; but I do wish you'd let 'em pull their own chestnuts out of the fire. You won't get off without a smartish singeing, as it is."

She smiled back at him in her old confident way. But there was no smile on her face a second later, as she turned aside to lock up the packet in a desk, the key of which hung on her *châtelaine*. Also, anyone watching her very closely, might have noticed that she touched the parcel with a certain shrinking and repugnance, and that she made haste to put it away out of her sight.

Early on the morrow, Macallister received a note from Mrs. Clyde, begging that he would arrange for her admission to the prison that afternoon, but declining any escort. On this occasion, Mariette did not deem it necessary to acquaint her husband, or even Harradine, of her intentions.

A dull autumn day was wearing on to dusk when she went forth alone. She still wore rather deep half-mourning, and an unusually thick black "fall" almost entirely shaded her face. The warders on duty were, perhaps, slightly surprised at seeing this visitor quite unaccompanied. But they had evidently got their instructions; for, without question, she was conducted to Major Griffiths' cell.

He was not sitting, as before, but pacing to and fro; and, almost before the bolt was shot home in the lock, he turned on Mariette, saying, in a hurried whisper—

"Have you brought it?"

She took the chair, which this time he had forgotten to proffer, drawing it slightly forward as she sat down, so that the rough wooden table, strewn with books and papers, was betwixt them.

"I have brought it," she said slowly; "but whether I can give it you I doubt."

The dark, dangerous expression that came over his face would have made many women look anxiously towards the door. But Mariette only looked up at him with bright stedfast eyes, utterly void of fear. After a second or so he seemed to recollect himself too ; for, when he spoke, it was half-imploringly.

"You cannot mean to play me false. Remember, you promised without any reservation."

Though her eyes were stedfast, still her voice faltered.

"I did not—I could not guess. If you could only say that packet holds nothing—deadly ——"

She was moved strangely beyond her wont, and her breath came hard and painfully, as she waited for the reply, which was long delayed. Very sorely was Evan Griffiths tempted, just then, to use evasion, if not falsehood. For, thereby, he might not only attain his own immediate end, but also save the woman sitting there from self-reproach, and a sense of guiltiness in the coming time. But the innate honesty of the man prevailed ; and he answered in a grave, quiet voice, wherein mingled, too, a certain pathos, like that of one urging his very last plea.

"I want you to look back and remember that, from the first time we met, I never crossed wish of yours, or grudged help when I could give it. I want you to remember that, if I grew mad at last, I was never so mad as to betray myself ; and that up to the very end I would have cut out my tongue by the roots, and my hand at the wrist, rather than have insulted you by word or gesture. I want you to remember that the crime for which I shall die—die deservedly—I wrought at least with no hope of selfish profit ; for the very act set a gulf betwixt you and me for ever. Remembering all this—I want you to answer just one question. In the old times of rack and wheel, if a friend of yours had been about to undergo his punishment, would you have delayed the *coup de grâce* till the torture was complete ? Why, even saints, I believe, have bribed the hangman to strangle a martyr before the fire reached him. And there are no saints or martyrs here. This much I can say—nothing more."

Her eyes lost their stedfastness, sinking lower and lower ; and not her hand alone, but her whole frame was trembling, as she drew forth a packet from the breast of her

high dress, and pushed it across the table. Griffiths' fingers closed round it, not with violent haste, but with a terrible tenacity; even as the fingers of a drowning man close round a bough swept within his grasp by the capricious torrent; and he drew a long deep breath, like one nearly stifled, who at length inhales free pure air.

If the costliest thing that this earth can produce had been laid before him there, he would no more have exchanged it for that tiny packet, than King Solomon would have bartered, for some rare jewel, the ring whereby he ruled Afreet and Jhinn. The prison walls were solid, the prison gates fast as ever; but an avenue of escape had just been opened that neither judge, jury, nor gaolers could close. What were all outward and palpable signs of captivity, when he stood there—free from fear of further public shame—free to choose betwixt life and death?

If one single doubt as to the nature of her mission had lingered in Mariette's mind, the lightening of his face would have changed it into certainty. Neither could she dissemble further; and the words escaped her almost involuntarily.

"Is there no other hope—no other way?"

"Not one, he answered. "But this is more than sufficient. I should be satisfied—quite satisfied—now, if I could feel sure you would never grudge having done me this great kindness."

She shook her head sorrowfully, keeping her eyes still downcast. The exultant ring of his voice jarred on her ear like a discord; indeed her nerves, tough as they were, were beginning to yield to the strain. The atmosphere seemed suddenly to have grown faint and oppressive, like that of a sick chamber; and the gas-jet, flickering in the corner of the cell, seemed to bring out on the other's face those shadows that are seen only on the faces of the dying. She was well aware that all these terrors were fantastic, but they were none the less intolerable; and she started up, saying in a hurried, scared voice—

"I must go now. I cannot stay."

Without a word of remonstrance, he stepped forward and smote twice on the door sharply, signalling to the warder on duty without. As the footsteps came down the corridor, Mariette drew closer to her companion.

"Good-bye," she said, drearily. "Yes, you may take my hand now. It is not more innocent than yours."

For quite a second he hesitated. Then his fingers closed round hers after the old firm fashion, and in the old fashion his cheek flushed, too.

When the door swung open, the pair were standing decorously apart; and, rather by the motion of his lips than by any audible word, Mariette divined that Evan Griffiths returned her farewell.

The thick black fall was drawn more closely down during her hasty egress from the gaol; and, if an enemy had been on her track, she could scarce have made more speed homewards. Neither did she breathe freely till she was safely locked in her own chamber. Nevertheless, when her self-possession returned, pondering over these things at leisure, Mariette Clyde would not, if she could, have undone that evening's work.

Should such cynicism or obduracy seem to you improbable, remember, if you please, that this woman was, to all intents and purposes, not a whit less a pagan than those amiable Academics who watched their master drain the hemlock; or than that Soldier-Sage who made such an edifying end at Utica. With all possible respect for the baptismal sacrament, if parents and sponsors consider their duties done when they turn their backs on the font, and their deficiencies are supplied by no other guide or instructor, I cannot see that a child is more likely to develop into a sound practical Christian, than he is to attain a wranglership without previous mathematical training. Indeed, as our natural proclivities are notoriously perverse, the improbabilities of the former case would seem rather to exceed those of the latter.

Mariette Locksley's whole education had been a matter of chance and accident; but for perfect secularity, it might have satisfied the most advanced assessor at our existent School Board. She had shrunk, a while ago, from complicity in crime, just as an Indian girl, not yet hardened by habit, might shrink from the first sight of torture. But the repugnance was of instinct, not of reason; and, in after time, her connivance would seem to her less a crime than a painful necessity.

Notwithstanding all this, Mariette had not philosophy—perhaps not patience—enough to encounter at dinner that evening Leonard's maundering curiosity, or Pete Harradine's silent scrutiny. So on the plea of headache, not altogether feigned, she kept her own chamber.





CHAPTER XXX.

THE CONTENTS OF THE PACKET.

NOW, in company with that halting imp who is ever at the romancer's service, let us pay one more visit to Ballynane gaol.

Three full days had elapsed since Evan Griffiths bade Mariette Clyde farewell, and his condition, both of body and mind, seemed unchanged. With much outward docility he had followed the surgeon's prescriptions, without greatly benefiting thereby : at least he still complained of the same palpitations and fits of faintness, and, according to his own account, slept no sounder. In several points, as you are aware, the prison discipline had been relaxed in his favour ; and, perhaps, his chief indulgence was the permission to keep his gas burning long after the regular hour of curfew. It was not till midnight, indeed, that the jet was cut off in the corridor without.

The fourth day was far spent, and the major, having done rather more justice than usual to his evening meal, was pacing to and fro in his cell, according to his custom, when the warder on duty looked in whilst going his last round. As Griffiths bade the man good-night, he inquired if a note, that he would prepare in the meantime, could be sent down to barracks early on the morrow. On receiving an affirmative reply he seemed quite satisfied, and, as the door closed, sat down to the table, drawing writing materials towards him.

A long time, however, elapsed before he actually put pen to paper : at last he began to indict a letter, and it ran thus,—

“MY DEAR MACALLISTER,—It may seem strange to you that one in my condition should be anxious about his health. But I have a strong desire to live on yet awhile, if only to let justice take its course. Somehow—this, too, may seem strange to you—I do not greatly fear the result.”

Only with a strong effort he succeeded in writing those words firmly. And, perforce, he paused here ; for his brow grew damp and his features contracted as if a spasm racked him. Yet it was nothing more than a revolt of pride—if not of principle—against the penning of a lie. He went on after a pause ; but the handwriting was visibly less steady.

“The surgeon here is both zealous and skilful. But your long knowledge of my habits and constitution might enable you to give him some useful hints ; and I am certain he would gladly consult with you. I leave it to you to fix ——”

He came to an abrupt check here, saying half-aloud, in a thick, gasping voice—

“That’s enough, surely.”

And, as he spoke, the pen he had just filled dropped from his fingers on the paper, leaving a broad blot where it fell. Then he arose, and for some while paced to and fro again. He halted at length, immediately under the gas-jet ; and, drawing forth the packet you wot of, unwrapped it very carefully.

Within the folds of brown paper was a small wooden case, rather shallow than deep, and within this again, wrapped in cotton, two common cardboard pill-boxes, one of about the ordinary size, the other infinitely smaller. The two last-named objects Griffiths laid on the table behind him, and then, with infinite pains, and not a little skill, proceeded to make a tiny pyre of the wooden case and outer wrappings, adding thereto certain written papers of his own : he coaxed and nursed the flame so effectually that at last nothing but a little heap of dark ashes remained, which a few strong breaths easily scattered to the four corners of the cell.

This accomplished, the prisoner sat down again, as though wishing to rest for awhile ; he looked, indeed, strangely

fagged and weary, considering that he had scarcely done more than use his fingers deftly. But, as many of us can testify, to tire under the weight of thought is no rare case ; and, in truth, the tenor of this man's musings was somewhat heavy

By physical fear he was not troubled one whit. Having once accepted his position, he shrunk from it no more than he would have shrunk from some military service, the performance of which must need cost him his life. As for immaterial terrors—however miserably false their creed, few thorough fatalists are disquieted over measure when their foot is on the threshold of the unknown world. It was over the past, rather than over the future, that Evan Griffiths meditated, and the current of his thoughts ran very far back.

It had been a dull, colourless thing, this life of his, after all. Even as a boy, he had had no holidays ; for, in his strict, methodical home, vacations were more irksome than school time. Though he liked his profession, lack of money and interest made his upward progress toilsome and slow ; and, slaving always in the mill of routine, he had known nothing of the romance of war. Whilst his fellows took their pleasure without stint or shame, partly from pride, partly from temperament, he had stood aloof, looking on their vagaries with a certain scorn—expecting, too, doubtless, substantial reward for his virtue. And what had his diligence, temperance, and continence availed ? Could idleness, riotous living, and harlots have brought him to any worse end than this ? Why, only within the last few weeks—or months, perhaps—he had learned what passion meant. The discovery had been costly, certainly : yet he hardly grudged the price, though the knowledge could never have profited him. For he saw plainly enough now, that had his desires ranged ever so wildly, he could never have been more than a friend to Mariette Clyde. Still it was some satisfaction that no one, either living or dead, had, thus far, fared much better ; and then he fell to wondering, in a calm speculative way, what manner of man would first teach this stubborn heart what it was to *love*. It had been a sharp shock when he first knew, of a surety, that Clare Archbold had been causelessly done to death. But the keenness of remorse had not long endured ; and his regret now rather

resembled that of a judge who learns, too late, that a sentence, just in itself, has, by an unlucky chance, been carried out on an innocent person. One life, more or less, in the world—as the world stood for Evan Griffiths—did not seem much to matter ; and of his own bloodguiltiness, in his sombre fatalism, he recked but little. His soul would fare as it had been predestined ; and, if a penalty was to be paid in the hereafter, present penitence would scarcely lighten it.

Musing thus—in a slow mechanical way, he opened, one by one, the boxes lying before him. In the smaller of these were two silvered pills exhaling, as soon as the cover was removed, a faint aromatic odour : in the larger, again wrapped in cotton, was a gelatine capsule, about as large as a horse-bean, but thicker. These objects Griffiths placed on the table, covering them with his handkerchief ; and, crossing over to the gas-jet again, with little trouble reduced cardboard and cotton to impalpable ashes. Then, he resumed his seat and sate still for a while, seemingly in deep thought, shading his face with his hand.

It was not that he wavered in his purpose, or regretted his resolve. Even if life had seemed more pleasant and precious to him—even if his chances of escape from human justice had been fairer—he would not have hesitated for the hundredth part of an instant. Only a little while ago, two things, above all others, were near to this man's heart—the credit of his house, and the credit of his corps. And howsoever distraught on other points, of these he had never ceased to be careful. The world might judge him as hardly as it would ! but, as things were, it must, at the worst, remain an open question, whether to the old family, or the old regiment, should attach the taint of felony. If these stimulants had been wanting, was it likely that he would allow Mariette Clyde's name to be bandied to and fro by hired advocates throughout a long public trial, even if she were not actually dragged into the witness box ? She had, at least, deserved better at his hands than this.

At the bare notion, he smiled rather grimly ; as had been his wont when savouring a caustic word or bitter jest. Then, lifting the kerchief, he put the silvered pills in his mouth, and chewed them slowly ; as he did so, the faint aromatic odour became pungent, and spread through the cell. A few

seconds later, without hurry or tremor, handling it delicately, like some costly and fragile thing, he placed the capsule betwixt his lips, and, throwing his head far back, crushed it betwixt his sharp strong teeth.

He was a cunning chemist who prepared that medicament, and earned his large charges honestly ; for, if lightning had stricken him then and there, the course of Evan Griffiths' being could not have been more swiftly stayed. There was not a convulsion—nay, scarcely a shiver of limb or feature—only a collapse, sudden and complete. The *torso* shrank over sideways on the table, so that the head was pillowed, and half buried, in the crossed arms ; and the cheek that lay exposed, was blanched to the dull whiteness of a waxen mask ; whilst, from first to last, the dead silence of the place had never been broken by the faintest sigh.

The warder on duty was both alert and vigilant ; yet, he never wist that, a little before midnight, a stranger passed his post—powerful against bolts and bars as He who “smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, *Arise up quickly.*” Only, this envoy wore not shining white raiment, and there followed him forth not a living saint, but a **very** sinful soul





CHAPTER XXXI.

CREGG MORE TO LET.

THERE was naturally no small stir in Ballynane gaol when the catastrophe was discovered. The surgeon was speedily on the spot ; but he could do no more than make a careful examination of the corpse, and draw up his official report. The minutest search revealed nothing to justify suspicion of suicide : indeed, except that a few light ashes—no more than half-a-dozen burnt letters might leave—were sprinkled here and there, the aspect of the cell was absolutely unchanged. There was the half-finished note to Macallister, with the pen lying as it had fallen, amidst splashes of ink ; and everything went to show that the prisoner, in the very act of writing, had been overtaken by a heart-spasm, and that his death had been swift and painless.

Certainly around the pale flaccid lips there still lingered an almost imperceptible aromatic odour. But of this only the surgeon was sensible ; and, if he had his own surmises, he was too charitable to divulge them. At the coroner's inquest that ensued, he gave such evidence that a verdict, ascribing the death to the "Visitation of God," followed almost as a matter of course ; and, if in that testimony there was a slight touch of *suppressio veri*, or even of *suggestio falsi*, I fancy that same was not set down amongst his heaviest misdeeds.

So the major of the 120th was buried, after all, if not with military honours, at least in consecrated ground, and with no maimed ritual. Yet the funeral was more than private; and, of his old comrades, only two—the chief and Macallister—followed the coffin through the dusk of the evening. It was this last who afterwards caused to be set up there a humble gravestone whereon was graven, besides the initials and the date, the pitiful text—

Judge not, that ye be not Judged.

Evan Griffiths' meagre heritage reverted, almost in its entirety, to the solitary kinsman who had visited him in his trouble. Truly, that austere person received no more than his due; for, in ministering to the afflicted, he had perhaps, construed rather freely the obligations of his profession. Howsoever lonely his end, he who died in Ballynane gaol died not without "benefit of clergy."

Ever since her visit there, Mrs. Clyde's frame of mind had much resembled that of a conspirator who, having fired a slow-match, waits for the explosion which must certainly occur after an uncertain lapse of time. Even when the watcher stands at the discreetest distance, after the fashion of the late lamented Mazzini, the suspense is apt to be wearying; and only wonderful self-command enabled Mariette, during that afternoon, to bear herself so unconcernedly. Nevertheless, when doubt—or rather expectation—was absolutely changed into certainty, her nerve very nearly failed her.

She was sitting at breakfast with her husband and Harradine, when the former's soldier-servant brought in the news. Leonard's open-mouthed wonder was easy enough to encounter; but the keen questioning of Pete's hard grey eyes was quite another matter, and, under their scrutiny, Mariette felt her cheek turning white and cold.

Clyde hurried off at once to barracks to learn further particulars; and, for several minutes after the other two were left alone together, neither spoke. Quoth Pete, at last, very grimly:

"So that play's played out, I reckon; and not a bit too soon. A month ago I thought I knew a thing or two, and

that I shouldn't easily be astonished. But one lives and learns. I wonder what's the next game I shall be asked to join in. This time, it seems, I've been taking a hand at 'Sudden Death,' without knowing it. But it don't much matter what comes to me; they've said pretty near their worst of old Pete Armstrong. I'm thinking what's going to come to you, Missy, even if you get well clear of this scrape. You're not twenty yet, and you haven't been married six months. What sort of a finish is it like to be with such a start?"

Her face lighted up a little. With all her hardihood, it was a certain relief to find that she was not going to be directly questioned as to her share in the recent past.

"What's the use of looking forward?" she answered, carelessly. "When the luck's at the worst—I've heard you say so a dozen times—it's always most likely to change. When I leave this place—and I wish I could leave it to-morrow—I never wish to speak, or think, or hear of it again. But, Pete, if you knew all, you wouldn't take much blame to yourself, or lay much blame on me for what has happened quite lately. Someone"—she shivered ever so slightly here—"spoke truth, I do believe, when he said, 'there was no other way.'"

Having to a certain extent, freed his soul, Harradine was, in reality, no more inclined than his companion to dwell on a certain subject, and caught rather eagerly at the diversion.

"Ah, you'd like to clear out of this? I don't wonder at it. It's out-and-out the best thing you can do. If Clyde can't get leave, I'll take you wherever you like till he can join you. I suppose you wouldn't care to stay with his people alone. But, though he's not a favourite here, judging from what I've seen in barracks, I think he *will* get leave if he goes in for it in earnest."

Leonard himself, when the matter was referred to him, seemed in no wise loth to turn his back on Ballynane. Even, to his sodden comprehension it was evident that he was again in disfavour with his comrades. No one, of course, could hold him really accountable for any one scene in the late tragedy. Nevertheless, the very sight of him was a perpetual reminder thereof; and there began to attach to him that irrational, but deeply-rooted prejudice that some

gamesters feel against an utter stranger, whose appearance invariably seems to bring them bad luck.

Also, though it could not be said that Mrs. Clyde had grown actually unpopular, the impression, referred to above, that her influences were dangerous, had decidedly gained strength of late. Neither was there anyone left in the regiment so bold as to aspire to be once more reckoned amongst her familiars.

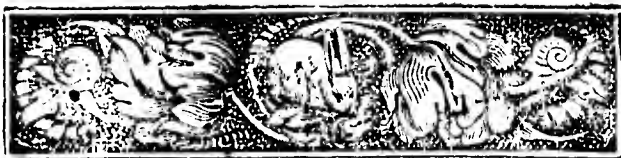
So it befell that when Lieutenant Clyde's application for leave went in, everyone—from the chief down to the subaltern, who might have claimed priority of choice—was found ready to further it. Within the week, Creggmore was again open to an eligible tenant, and Ballynane began to settle down into its chronic dullness.

After awhile, by a very natural re-action, the outside public began to suspect that they had made a mighty mystery out of a very small matter ; and the theory whereon Colonel Daveney insisted so strongly, was the one that, in the end, most generally prevailed. Amongst the peasant folk of that country side Evan Griffiths is still spoken of as the "Mad Major."

The 120th, howsoever diverse may have been their private opinions, as a corps, implicitly endorsed their chief's judgment ; and, to this day, it would be considered a grave breach of etiquette, if not of discipline, to cast a doubt on this regimental tradition.

Truly, when all was said and done, perhaps the wrong-headed descendant of Cymric kings was as much entitled to the benefit of a legal doubt, or legal fiction, as some of the sleek Barnadines, or brutal Abhorsons, "confined during her Majesty's pleasure."





CHAPTER XXXII.

ON LEAVE.

THOUGH, regularly as the years revolve, journalists or reviewers expound the advantages of the "off-season," to such as are free to come and go as they will, London, in late autumn, will scarcely seem a desirable place of sojourn. But let any inclined to be fastidious on this point, take one long spell at Irish country quarters, and see whether, on his return thereto, he will be inclined to speak despiteously of the "wilderness of brick and mortar." Under such circumstances, the very rush and rustle of busy life acts as a sort of tonic; the gas-lamps flash out cheerily, like the lights round a desired haven; and even the street cries sound not unmusically.

Mariette Clyde was by no means a regular town-mouse, and was, indeed, less familiar with this metropolis than with many Continental cities; nevertheless, looking from the window of their lodgings on the morning after their arrival, she was lighter of spirit than she had felt for some time past. For beyond doubt—philosopher as she was—recent events had left an impression on her not easily to be shaken off. Though it was most true that she regretted Clare Archbold simply and solely as a friend, she did miss him terribly. Since yonder fatal evening, she had never touched brush or pencil; and her favourite books—the books they

used to discuss—seemed to have lost their savour and zest: she had fallen into a way of musing, too, of late, very foreign to her nature, which was rather active than thoughtful. Maybe, too—though she was scarce conscious of this—she sometimes regretted a little that other life, so swiftly and completely wrecked.

But with change of scene all this was changed; and, before she had been twenty hours in town, Mariette had ceased to dwell on the past, and had begun to live in the present again. Only, on this one thing was she firmly resolved, that neither authority nor persuasion should induce her to re-cross the Irish Channel. And, furthermore—though this project was still in embryo—she fully reckoned on inducing her husband to exchange into some other marching regiment, if better might not be. She did not anticipate much difficulty here; for, Leonard seemed to grow, both mentally and physically, more torpid daily. He droned about now, always in the same heavy purposeless way, and, even under the influence of his favourite stimulants, remained obstinately taciturn.

However, they were hardly settled in their lodgings, when Clyde surprised his wife not a little by announcing his intention of paying a visit to his people, who had lately come down from Glencorquodale to their winter residence, some few miles from Glasgow.

“I don’t suppose you want to come,” he said, sulkily; ‘and, if you did, you’re better away from there just now. If you didn’t wrangle with anybody else, you’d be safe to have a row with Rhoda, and I want her to help me with the governor; she can do more with him than all of us put together. He’ll have to part a bit freer if he means to keep us going at all; we don’t make both ends meet, as it is, by a long way. I suppose you didn’t know that, and don’t care now you do know it.”

For a wonder—he was not good at divining—Leonard was not far from the fact in both his assumptions. To matters of finance, since her marriage, Mariette had hardly given a thought. Her housekeeping was conducted strictly on first principles: she ordered dinner as a matter of taste, and looked over the weekly books as a matter of form; but into the cost of the one, or the accuracy of the other,

she never troubled herself to inquire. If a town-bred cook, instead of an honest, heavy-handed Irishwoman, had ruled the roast at Creggmores, there would have been plundering on a royal scale.

Truly, Leonard never opened his purse, or cheque-book, without a running accompaniment of expletives. But grumbling and strong language were as natural to him as chewing the cud to a ruminant; so to this fact Mariette attached little importance. In her old home, the enforced economy of one week would be followed by lavish expenditure in the next; and, though Captain Locksley's extravagances were chiefly selfish, it must be owned his daughter had got so used to living from hand to mouth, that she took no more thought of the morrow than a "light-minded bird." Those misgivings of Mariette's at Glencorquodale, concerning the stability of the Clyde fortunes, had been very vague and transitory. Furthermore, a kind of recklessness had come over her of late. The matrimonial chain, that once seemed easy to carry, dragged more heavily day by day; and sometimes she thought that no price would be too costly to pay for the regaining of her freedom.

Yet this was the same Mariette Locksley who had planned and carried out so coolly and deliberately her scheme of "settlement." Her inconsistency, however, has many parallels. Long after they have ceased to dwell in tents, the wild nomadic instincts will break out, every now and then, in the most prudent and provident of born Bohemians.

Certainly, howsoever ungracious in manner, a more tractable spouse, in all essentials, than Leonard Clyde could hardly have been found. Since his first discomfiture he had made no fresh attempt to assert himself, and Mariette was free to go her own way without hindrance or question. Yet, somehow, the constant presence of that heavy, lowering face, and clumsy, flaccid figure irritated her intolerably; and, now that she was thrown back on her own resources, she lacked patience to keep up the easy neutrality that had answered so well at Creggmores.

Therefore you may conceive that her satisfaction more than equalled her surprise when Leonard announced his

intention of going northwards alone. Here was respite and breathing space, at all events ; and the prospect so elated Mariette that, instead of answering it in kind, she parried his rude speech lightly.

"Good luck to your fishing," she said. "You're quite right, too ; I should only be in the way when you're casting the net. If Rhoda has any scruples about helping, tell her I'll buy a ready reckoner and learn book-keeping whilst you're away, and go in steadily for accounts when you come back. I'd no idea ours was a 'case of real distress ;' but that ought to tell all the better with the authorities."

He never smiled at her jest ; but went on, with the same surly hang-dog look—

"I'll manage my own people in my own way. How do *you* mean to manage? You must have some one to look after you. I could get Aunt Charlotte to take you in. If you won't go there, there is only Harradine."

Now this Aunt Charlotte was the grim mother of those gaunt virgins who appeared last in Fulmerstone Church ; and, at the name, Mariette actually shivered.

"Thank you," she retorted, sweeping a saucy curtsy. "If I'm to be looked after, it won't be through your aunt's spectacles. Why, before I'd been a week under her roof, she'd poison me, as a matter of principle. And if I escaped her, I should never escape the cousins. 'Only Harradine,' you said? Only old Pete—who has taken better care of me since I was a child than most respectable guardians do of their wards. He may not be a very creditable-looking *chaperon*, but he's good enough and safe enough—for me. He can have those rooms up-stairs, of course ; luckily, he's not particular about his quarters."

Clyde's old grudge against the individual in question was in nowise abated : but it was his way to make use of people whom he liked, or disliked, quite impartially ; and he could not well dispense with the other's services here. So he sanctioned the arrangement, after a fashion, and started northwards by that evening's mail.

They had a pleasant, if not a merry time of it,—those other two who tarried behind. In the forenoon, Harradine went about his own "business," the which mainly seemed to consist in lounging to and fro from one resort of turfite

to another, and picking up stray scraps of racing gossip. It was more from force of habit, than from any special keenness for speculation that he did this; for, since his confederate's death, he had waxed in these matters cautious, even to timidity; and his rare wagers were on a very trivial scale. Overhearing one of their debates in the old time, you would have thought that Pete's single object was to get his own way. But, now that he could act quite unfettered, he had no heart for it, and let chance after chance slip by unprofitably. Like many others, he missed the bracing effect of contradiction, and found out that encountering substantial obstacles wearies much less than the "beating of the air." Few men, perhaps, were less generally regretted than Arthur Locksley; nevertheless, he certainly left behind him one enduring *desiderium*.

During the rest of the day Harradine was entirely at Mariette's service. Each afternoon, unless rain was actually falling, the pair sallied forth for a long brisk walk; and in these constitutionals—always varied in direction—they explored divers strange places, where feet, delicately shod, have seldom penetrated. After dinner they usually went to some theatre; for, though the conventional period of Mariette's mourning had scarce expired, she knew, literally, no one in town; and, except by some stray Continental acquaintance, was not likely to be recognised. Whether their evenings were spent at home or abroad, they invariably kept very late hours. These vigils were not very conversational; but Harradine would sit there for hours, watching his companion, whilst she read or worked, with a lazy complacency, just as an artist might survey a recently completed picture.

They were sitting so one evening—dinner had not long been over—when Mariette remarked carelessly, not glancing up from her work—

"It's rather odd Leonard has never written."

"He *can* write, then?" the other suggested, with an incredulous curve of the brows.

"Of course he can. He's not quite so helpless as that comes to. Do you suppose I never heard from him at Fulmerstone?"

"I don't suppose one way or the other," he retorted

smoking on placidly ; " and, unless I'd watched the postman, how was I to know? You kept your love-letters pretty dark, Missy."

" Love-letters !"—The satiric intonation cannot be rendered—" I wish you'd talk sensibly. You know quite well what was his business in the North ; and it must have been finished by this time. He's not nice to talk with—*Monsieur mon beau-père*—but he will hear reason. I hate myself now, for not settling about the exchange with Leonard before he started. It would have saved so much trouble, and perhaps another storm."

" You think that can be managed, then ? " Pete inquired doubtfully.

" It *must* be managed "—her face, just then, was strangely like her father's in one of his " set " moods. " If the 120th were transferred to the pleasantest of all home quarters to-morrow, nothing would induce me to go near the regiment again. If Leonard ever returns to it, he will go back *en garçon*. But I don't think it will ever come to that. He's obstinate up to a certain point, and then ——"

A significant smile completed the sentence. It was still flickering on her lip when there came a roll of wheels in the street without, and a cab drew up at the door. Harradine rose up from his seat, jerking the ash from his cigar with manifest impatience.

" That's him, I'll pound it," he grumbled ; " you'll hear all about it presently. I shall finish my smoke up-stairs."

Though she was perfectly fearless, Mariette Clyde felt strangely disinclined to be left alone just then. But she was too proud to avow this, even to Pete, with whom she stood on scant ceremony. Whilst she hesitated, a slow lumbering step came up the stairs ; the banister-rail shook and creaked, as though some one had clutched it to save a stumble ; a rough hand turned the lock, and Leonard Clyde stood on the threshold.



CHAPTER XXXIII.

A CRASH AND A CLIMAX.

T was not a pleasant picture that was framed in yonder doorway. The gross clumsy figure looked uncouth, as it swayed unsteadily to and fro ; the ill-fitting dress hung all awry ; the coarse features were flushed and swollen ; and in the dull bleared eyes gleamed a vague ferocity, like the torches gleaming through marsh-mists.

Even on Harradine's stolid face, repugnance was legible enough ; and over Mariette's stole that same expression which it had worn at Fulmerstone, when she looked in on her bridegroom, in passing, just after doffing her bridal garments.

Without any form of greeting, either of word or gesture, Clyde flung himself into the nearest chair, glowering at the other two from under his heavy brow.

"You make yourself at home here, at any rate," he said, in a thick husky voice. "The place smells like a ——— tap-room."

Harradine had risen, as you know ; but, after one glance at the new comer, he seemed to alter his intention, and, resuming his seat at the fireside, smoked on with a little extra energy, allowing Mariette to take up the daggers.

"Then the place ought to suit you thoroughly," she retorted coolly, "judging from appearances. But, even so,

I should advise your going straight to bed, Leonard. Your news, I daresay, will keep till to-morrow."

He half started from his chair; but sank back again, flinging his felt hat into the furthest corner of the room, and plucking open his overcoat, as though he wanted air.

"My news won't keep an hour, as it happens;" he growled, "and I mean to have it out with you before I sleep."

"To have it out with me?" she repeated with a cold emphasis, that even to drunken ears might have sounded ominous. "Well—perhaps it is best so."

Clyde's large provision of Dutch courage seemed scarcely equal to the demand; and, to be kept up to the mark, his sullen temper needed the spur. He did not answer Mariette for a while, but turned savagely on Harradine.

"I want to talk to my wife—my *wife*, mind—do you hear me?"

Pete's hard grey eyes returned the enmity of the other's glance with interest.

"Yes, I hear," he answered gruffly—"so can the people across the street, for the matter of that. But you'll have to speak louder yet, before you persuade me that you're fit to be left alone with any woman, married or single."

How far momentary fury would have supplemented the deficiencies of Clyde's valour, must remain an open question: for, before he could frame a retort, Mariette interposed.

"I think you'd better finish your smoke upstairs, Pete," she said, carelessly. "Leonard is in his right here; and he's right, too, to make the most of this chance. They are his own family news that he brings, after all."

Seeing Harradine hesitate, she crossed over to where he sate, and went on in a low imperious tone—

"*Es tu bête*—to suppose that I could be cowed by *him*? And, even if he were dangerous, are you not always within call? But he will be much quieter when you're gone."

Silently and reluctantly—glancing over his shoulder as he went, like a well-broken retriever sent on an errand that he hates—Harradine did as he was bidden. But, though he drew the door to carefully behind him, he, in reality, left it only partly closed.

In matters of business, Mariette seldom allowed her feelings to intervene. She would fain have adjourned the domestic debate till questions could be discussed soberly, if not sensibly ; but—once having accepted the situation—she prepared to profit thereby, quite dispassionately. On her face there were no more signs of anger or aversion, than of kindness or encouragement, as she waited for her husband to begin. Her perfect self-possession acted, even on his heated blood and sodden brain, so far composingly, that he spoke without violence of voice or manner. But his eyes were hostile as ever ; only, to ferocity there had succeeded dull malignity. His oratory, as on a former occasion, had best be epitomised ; for the jerky incoherent periods, profusely *piqués* with expletives, would alike weary compositor and reader : the sum and substance of his tale was as follows.

Leonard had been by no means warmly welcomed to the parental roof. Even his mother, who usually spoiled him, had met him with a certain coldness and constraint, as if she had been tutored beforehand as to the manner of her reception. His father who, even on indifferent subjects, seemed strangely fretful and irritable, snubbed and snapped at him from the very first ; and the terrible Rhoda stood decisively on the offensive. Nevertheless, as his elder brother was absent on some business mission, it was from her that Leonard learned the reasons of his disgrace.

Divers versions of the Ballynane tragedy had reached Glasgow. These, howsoever they might vary on other points, seemed to have concurred in affirming that the germs, at least, of the fatal discord had been sown at Creggmore. It was proven, at any rate—Clyde's soldier-servant had testified to this effect before the magistrates—that the murdered man had spent his last hour of life under that roof ; and within a furlong of its door she was slain. If that luckless *tête-à-tête* dinner was ill spoken of in Ballynane, the scandal, in travelling, had gained both volume and strength.

Though he had got so thoroughly used to Clare Archbold's "cousinly" ways, Leonard remembered vaguely having felt rather wroth about it himself, at the time. But the turmoil of events, each treading on the heels of his

fellow, had put the grievance out of his head ; and it was too late now to plead that he had meant to enter his protest. In any wrong, either of deed or intent, he was plainly implicated as an accomplice after the fact. However—according to his own account—the culprit had declined to plead, either on his own or his wife's behalf, before the family tribunal, and, entrenching himself in sullen silence, had allowed judgment against both to go by default. There was great verisimilitude about this part of his story, and Mariette could imagine the domestic drama perfectly.

Rhoda herself had used great plainness of speech, and had not scrupled to impute to her sister-in-law lightness of carriage, at the least, and a reckless contempt of the proprieties. And here, again, Mariette's quick fancy was at work. She could see the corners of the thin straight lips drawn down, as the bitter words escaped them ; she could hear the harsh abrupt voice dealing forth truculent texts, and dark allusions to Moab and Midian.

The narrator went on to say that, finding himself in such disfavour with the family, rather confirmed his intention of making demands on the family exchequer. This, too, seemed likely enough ; for Leonard stood, perhaps, less in awe of the parental authority than any other ; and Mr. Clyde, senior, was not adapted, either physically or morally, to impose on any one not absolutely his subordinate. On the present occasion, however, he seemed so unaccountably fretful and irritable, that Leonard decided to defer financial statements till his sire should be in a more rational frame of mind ; and got through the next two days as best he could, spending as much of his time abroad as he could decently contrive.

Returning home on the third evening, just before the dinner hour, he was aware of a certain stir and commotion in the household, and learned that Mr. Clyde was even then under medical treatment for some kind of fit or seizure.

Only his eldest son, who had returned that same afternoon, was with him when he was so overtaken. Directly he saw his brother's scared face, Leonard guessed that something more than sickness was the matter ; filial sympathy alone would not have accounted for such utter

discomposure. Further concealment was quite useless: indeed, Robert told his family that evening little more than was known already on Glasgow 'Change. The crash, that had been staved off by all manner of shifts and expedients, had come at last in its completeness; and the firm of Clyde and Son would appear in the morrow's list of bankrupts.

Under the application of strong remedies, consciousness soon returned, and the paralytic symptoms were abated; but the patient was forbidden to talk or exert himself in any way for the present. Besides this, Mr. Clyde seemed to have conceived some extraordinary grudge against his younger son. Though, under certain precautions, the rest of the family were allowed to enter it, Leonard was absolutely excluded from the sick chamber. As the evening wore on, however, he had practical proof of his father's convalescence, in the shape of a message, whereof his brother was the bearer. Harsh and hard in itself, it was not softened by the manner of its delivery; for the messenger was none of those who "do their spiriting gently." Mr. Clyde gave his youngest-born clearly to understand that, under the changed aspect of the family fortunes, he need no longer expect to eat the bread of idleness:—thus did this base mechanical person describe the frugal fare of Britain's defenders. Leonard's allowance would be cut down to a scale barely sufficient to provide the mere necessities of life; and he would have to supplement this by what he could earn in some commercial position, which, as soon as he could fit himself for the post, would be provided for him at home or abroad: his papers, of course, were to go in at once. Any recalcitration would be visited by instant and complete stoppage of all supplies. A stormy scene ensued, of course; but Leonard's strong language seemed to have been wasted. Probably, indeed, on this point—expletives excluded—he found more than his match in his brother and sister, who made common cause. The poor mother was up-stairs, making her moan in her plethoric fashion, and utterly helpless under her first real trouble. So, without seeing either of his parents, early on the morrow, still in high dudgeon, Leonard departed southwards.

Truly a heavy budget of news ; and, if the old-fashioned recipe for drowning care were not exploded, the bearer thereof—especially if an “inebriate”—might stand excused for some slight extra excess. But neither drink nor dolour could palliate the malignity with which the speaker doled out his evil tidings. It seemed as though he almost forgot his own annoyances, in his exultation over the changed estate of that other listening so calmly there.

To comprehend this, you must remember that the animosities of these sullen, brutal natures, though petty, are always cumulative. Slight affronts which, at the moment, they do not appear to notice, such persons will put away carefully, each in its separate niche, and are perpetually taking stock of this storehouse. It is precisely because their offensive powers are apparently so weak, and their weapons so contemptible, that these moral cuttlefish are so difficult to deal with. As honest Jack Falstaff remarked—“a man knows not where to have them.”

Whilst Leonard Clyde had seemed to accept his position with stolid indifference, he was incessantly beset by a sense of injury. In his domestic scheme, as set forth before marriage, he had meant to play the tyrant : what part he had really played you have seen. If he had wedded ever so submissive a wife, it is not probable that the sensual fancy that, with him, stood in the place of love, would have long endured. His present case resembled that of one who, intending to purchase a soft-pacing jennet, finds himself possessed of a fiery barb, to rein which he lacks strength or skill : he considered he had been cheated in his bargain, and was wroth accordingly. Every cool, slighting word, every disdainful glance, every satiric smile, he set down in the long account that he meant to settle with Mariette, whenever the occasion should serve. And here was the occasion. He had come to heavy grief, it was true ; but it was something to think that, in his ruin, he could drag her down likewise—that her dainty palate would have to use itself to pauper’s fare—that not a day would pass without one of her fancies being baulked, or one of her desires denied. For the nonce, instead of feeling depressed or despondent, he literally gloated over the prospect.

"So you'll have to come to your cuttings down, my lady," he said, with a coarse chuckle.

And still on Mariette's face there was no anger or surprise; but only that same contempt, and faint repugnance.

When a man's fortunes are at the worst, there not unfrequently comes a break in the blackness overhead—so faint and brief, perhaps, that only a wary eye would notice it—and, if the very most were made of this, the luck might possibly change. For the second time, since these two were made one, the husband had had a chance given him; and, for the second time, had turned it against himself. That such an ill-assorted union could ever have been a happy one, was manifestly impossible; nevertheless, it might have endured, after a fashion, had this crisis taken a different turn.

If Leonard Clyde had come home that evening broken in spirit, and bowed under the weight of his ill tidings, Mariette would, at the very worst, have doubted how she should bear herself. The marriage vow, to speak plain truth, fettered her but little—for her heathenism scarcely recognised sacred obligations; and the words uttered at the altar she looked upon as a simple contract, the observance of which must greatly depend on circumstances. But, even according to the Ishmaelitic code, something is due to those whose bread and salt one has eaten, were the same given ever so grudgingly. Moreover, trampling on the fallen was scarcely natural to her; for, though they had oft-times shown themselves "high of heart, and bloody of hand," this was never the Locksleys' way. If Leonard had made it plain that he looked to her for help in his trouble, she would probably have given support, even if she could not give sympathy, and have borne her share of the burden not grudgingly. But that she owed any consideration in the present, or any fealty in the future, to the drunken savage sitting over against her, with a dastard hate in his base, shifting eyes, it never entered into Mariette's heart to conceive. Her purpose was made up stedfastly long before he had finished speaking; thenceforward, through weal or woe, through good or evil report, their lives should be parted utterly. And, whilst thus resolving, she felt no more com-

punction than a galley-slave might feel severing himself from his companion of the chain.

"You have had your turn at talking to-night," she replied, composedly—not even noticing her husband's last taunt—"and to-morrow I will take mine. To-night, I will not answer or listen to another word. You can sleep in your dressing-room, if you choose; and, if you don't want the people of the house to interfere, you had better make no more disturbance. I'll see you in the morning as early as you please; but I'm going to my own room now, and I forbid your following me."

She rose up as she spoke. He was betwixt her and the door; and, had she betrayed ever so little of that physical tremor which even brave women cannot always suppress in a drunkard's presence, it is most certain—such a devilish spite possessed Leonard Clyde just then—that he would have used brute force to detain her. But he was helpless under those cold defiant eyes; and only glared up, cursing her betwixt his teeth, as she passed out.

In much the same strain he went on grumbling to himself, after he was left alone. Then he drew from a side pocket a half emptied case-bottle, and drained it to the last drop. The fiery draught acted effectually on senses already numbed by drink and fatigue. Leonard was barely able to stagger across the room, and fling himself on a couch, before a heavy Cyclopean sleep overcame him, which held him till long after daybreak.

As Mariette opened the door, a swift step passed up the staircase, and she guessed at once who had been on the watch without. However, she was not inclined to quarrel with the eavesdropper; and, instead of going straight to her own room, followed Harradine up to his apartments. The two sate late in talk; and, if Mariette had needed support in her resolve, she would have found it there. Pete was very strong on the point of separation; and so far accepted it as an accomplished fact, that he began, with much earnestness and gravity, to map out plans for his own and Mariette's future.

It is not worth while to give in detail the interview of the morrow. When, by comparison, "clothed and in his right mind," Clyde was not much more amiable or tractable than

overnight. But he would have been no match for Mariette single-handed ; and Harradine was a thorough-going backer. Beyond question, in Leonard's habits of late, fair grounds for a mensal and thoral severance might have been found ; nor, indeed, under present circumstances, was he likely to stand on his rights before any court of law. Nevertheless, he made a thoroughly mulish resistance ; biting and recalcitrating with every inch he yielded.

His dull eyes lusted no longer for Mariette's beauty ; her gay, saucy ways, instead of attracting, galled him now incessantly ; and, in his changed estate, the Locksley connection, from which he had hoped great things, would scarcely profit him at all. Still, he would have liked to cleave to his wife, for the mere pleasure of thwarting and tormenting. And he would have been obstinate to the end, but for one reason—a very simple one—he was afraid of her. When or wherefore he had become so he knew not ; but of the feeling he was perfectly conscious. Over such natures shadowy terrors have even more mastery than a substantial fear. Have you ever read Morris's "The Haystack in the Floods" ? Amongst the terrible realisms of that strange ballad, not the least lifelike is the vague dread that withholds Godmar from wreaking all his brutal will on desolate, desperate Jehane. Eventually, by dint of much bad language on one side, and infinite coolness on the other, the articles of separation were settled. Mrs. Clyde was free to go whither she would, and dwell wheresoever it pleased her ; but, if she lived according to her own devices, she was also to live on her own resources, requiring at the hand of her husband or his family no allowance or assistance whatever.

Notwithstanding the late collapse in the Clyde exchequer, Mariette might doubtless have made some better terms. But, though she was avaricious after a fashion, she coveted money as a means, rather than as an end ; and, on occasion, would fling it away broadcast, with all her father's lavishness. Oddly enough, Harradine, who had a notably keen eye for the main chance, moved no amendment here.

An agreement, rather informal, perhaps, but sufficiently binding on the parties, was signed then and there ; and thus these two, so lightly joined, were by their own act put asunder.

It was a singularly unromantic parting. The one held out her hand carelessly, as if she had quarrelled and made it up again with an ordinary acquaintance ; and the other took it with a growl and a grimace. Though his wife thought that no act of his married life became him like the leaving her presence for evermore, Leonard Clyde was ungracious and ungraceful to the last.

And now, from amongst our *Marionettes*, this ugly puppet shall vanish utterly. If the spectator is weary of him, so also is the wielder of the wires : yet his presentment was needful for the sake of the verity of the show.

Here, too, the curtain must fall for a while ; and the world—in the eye of your faith—must have waxed some few years older before it rises again.





CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE HEREDITARY TAINT.



SQUARE spacious room, with a high, dark wainscoting, old-fashioned carvings on the cornices and mouldings of the ceiling, and with an air of old-fashioned comfort about it; though the furniture is heavy and plain, and even the day-light, before it has filtered through the ground-glass windows, assumes a staid, business-like tone. Brought hither blindfold, you would guess at once that you were somewhere east of the Bar, and probably in the "partner's room" of some mercantile firm of credit and renown.

The November day is far spent, and the City lies already under twilight: but this room is still occupied, and of its tenants, one at least seems in no hurry to depart; for, when lights were brought in awhile ago, he never lifted or turned his head, but sate, as he sits now, gazing musingly into the fire. With this man's appearance you are already familiar: it is no other than Piers Coniston. The other may be sketched briefly.

A personable man is Horace Morland, though by no means of the heroic type. Both face and figure are too fleshy for his age, which can scarcely have touched thirty; yet neither is coarsely moulded, and clumsier proportions might be carried off by the excessive neatness of the well-fitting, well-chosen apparel. The worst points about him

are his eyes—ignoble in shape, uncertain in colour, and shifty in expression : also his smile, though sufficiently genial, is almost too ready to be quite real. Indeed, a little more outward and inward asperity would not make Horace Morland less attractive ; and some folks would like him better if he were not so very palpably *teres atque rotundus*. A good man of business, you say, almost instinctively ; and you would be right here : perhaps, within the circle of a mile round 'Change, it would be hard to find a better. With great prudence and accuracy, he combines audacity of conception and breadth of execution ; and a large share of the increased and still increasing prosperity of this house is fairly to be credited to the junior partner.

Piers Coniston is thoroughly aware of the fact, and, both in thought and word, renders to the other amply his due. Not exactly out of charity—for at his father's death Morland entered into a fair heritage—but certainly out of good nature, some seven years ago he had taken his young cousin into the firm ; and not often are benevolences so richly repaid. From the first moment of his settling down into harness, work, early or late, always seemed to Horace a labour of love ; and, though he would take his pleasures largely enough in their season, he never allowed them to hinder or interfere with the most trifling business detail. Quite a mercantile model, assuredly ; and it is no wonder that Coniston should place in his partner such implicit trust and reliance, as to defer to his opinion in certain matters where his own maturer judgment should by right have prevailed. He himself has grown somewhat slack at the helm of late, and he takes his ease with a quiet mind, knowing that the argosy is in charge of a yet more skilful steersman.

Yet it can scarcely be of business that they have been speaking just now ; for it is long since any such topic has brought out on Pier's broad brent brow such a cloud as presently possesses it—a cloud less of melancholy than of vexation and doubt.

"You have heard nothing more ?" he asks at length, half stifling a great sigh.

The other looks up with a start from his occupation of signing divers letters laid in order before him.

"Heard nothing?" he answers, vaguely ; then—as if

recollecting himself—"I beg your pardon, I quite forgot what we were talking about. No; I've not heard another word."

Had he forgotten? How was it then, that during that long silence, not for two seconds together had those furtive eyes of his relaxed their watchfulness.

"But you are sure to hear more, and you will be sure to tell me," Coniston persists anxiously.

"Very probably," the other rejoins, busying himself with his letters again; "and I will certainly tell you, if you wish it. But you take it far too seriously. I am sorry now I mentioned it at all."

"Do I take it too seriously?" Piers answers, in a low, sad voice. "You would not say so, if you knew what I know, and remembered what I remember. Have you never heard that there are hereditary maladies quite distinct from bodily disease—that there are generations of drunkards, for instance? Well, in that healthy Standish blood—I may say this to you—there is one of these taints:—they are born gamblers. They never could quite get rid of the old acres; but one squire after another burdened them to the utmost of his power through that same fatal weakness. When Hugh's grandfather was utterly ruined, he went to live abroad; and some relatives, with great pains and difficulty, contributed enough to maintain him and his family comfortably till his affairs could be somewhat arranged. The money was not put into his hands till he was actually on board the steamer in the river. The messenger's back was scarcely turned when the squire dropped into a shore-boat, and before morning he had lost every shilling at the hazard table. Hugh's father, whilst he had health and strength, was scarcely more sane. A loyaler gentleman—I knew him intimately—in all other respects, never breathed; but you could not trust him here: I mean that any pledge binding him to resist this one temptation was like flax before flame. He had full time to repent during his long mortal illness; and though he never avowed it, I can guess what was in his mind when he made those provisions by which Hugh's full majority is deferred till he shall be twenty-five. *Now*, do you think I take this matter too seriously?"

"Perhaps not," the other answers, without looking up

from his papers ; “ especially as you take such an interest in Hugh. I only meant that neither his stakes, so far, nor his losses were alarming.”

“ Losses ! ” Coniston retorts, scornfully. “ If he had won largely I should be sorrier still. Why, if he were to come to me to-morrow beggared—not through his own act and deed—he would meet no black or heavy looks from me. Take an interest in him ? Yes, you are right there. If it had pleased heaven to give me a son, I could not be more anxious for his welfare. Besides ——”

Far and fully as he trusted him, Coniston did not confide in his partner absolutely without reserve. But caution is quite superfluous here. His thoughts are just as patent to the other as if they had been freely outspoken. Bending lower over his desk, Morland compresses his full, red lips sharply. He does not need to be told that the wish nearest to Piers Coniston’s heart is to make Hugh Standish, in very deed, as his own son, by trusting him with Sybil’s happiness. Yet, though he was well aware of this, the fresh suggestion of it is gall and bitterness to Horace, and he answers with a tinge of irony—

“ After all, the remedy’s very simple. With your influence over him, you can easily make him promise to give up play—at any rate, high play.”

The other shakes his head despondently.

“ I made his father promise once, and I remember what came of it. I gained nothing and I nearly lost a friend ; and, with all his failings, I could ill have spared poor Geoffrey. Even as a boy, Hugh never wore leading strings, and it would be unwise to apply them, now that he’s so nearly his own master. Indeed, it is not so much the practice, as the propensity, that makes me anxious ; and, even if the habit were broken off for the present, one could not feel quite safe as to the future. I must think it over—think it well over—and perhaps I shall see my way clearer.”

Morland shrugs his shoulders slightly, as if he has had quite enough of the subject, and immediately changes it by asking some question on business. A few minutes later, Coniston walks away westwards alone.

The cause of his dissatisfaction was simple enough.

Hugh Standish had recently been elected to the "Chandos;" however, in the mere fact of this there was nothing specially alarming. It was not a regular play-club, like the "Herodium," famous for the slaughter of innocents, or the "Nemesis," where the mysteries of the *mala Dea* are celebrated with an awful solemnity; but a genial resort, where curious cars found the last *cancan* of the town savourily served, and curious palates the very perfection of cooking. Enrolment there was not easily or lightly attained; and at those well-guarded portals, candidates gently born, amply endowed, and of unblemished repute, oftentimes knocked in vain. Horace Morland himself, with all his popularity and diplomacy, came once decisively to grief before he gained admission there; and that Hugh Standish should have passed in easily at the first offer, was rather creditable to him than otherwise. But, from time immemorial, there had existed there a certain set addicted to high play—it was only a set, and throughout the club generally the contagion had never spread—but it always seemed to remain *au complet*; for, as often as death or disaster caused a defection of the ranks, the gap was sure to be filled up by some fresh confident recruit.

Now, in the early stage of his membership, Hugh had taken his pleasure at the "Chandos" very innocently, affecting all other of its luxurious chambers rather than the card-room, though he would cut in occasionally into a rubber, where good fellowship rather than the rigour of the game was the rule. But, of late, his habits in this respect had changed, and he had glided somehow into serious whist—serious not only as to the points, but as to the demeanour of the players. Jests and execrations were alike rare at that grave table in the recess where, when the rubber was over, even the outside bettors discussed with bated breath the chances of the cards. The stakes, as Morland had said, were not actually "alarming;" but, if luck ran counter, they would have told heavily on a stronger banking account than Hugh at present could show; and, if a loser wished to plunge to get home, he might easily be fooled to the top of his bent.

Standish was a fair player, a little better, perhaps, than average University form. But he was pitted here not only

against longer heads, but longer purses than his own and oddly enough—for the converse seems rather the rule in such cases—the battle from the first had gone decisively against him.

In his own club haunts, Coniston had heard nothing of all this; and, only that same afternoon, a remark of Morland's—apparently careless and casual—had put him on the track. Knowing what he now did, it was no marvel that he carried homewards so heavy a heart. It in no wise lessened the difficulty, that betwixt his daughter and his late ward there existed no actual affiancement. When, some time ago, Hugh sounded him on the subject, Coniston had virtually given his consent. When he stipulated that no substantial engagement should be understood to exist, before the beginning of the year in which Standish would attain his full majority, the lover was not at all inclined to murmur. It was only a few months' delay after all; and, meanwhile he could feel just as much at home as ever, both at Hern Court and the pleasant house in Devorgoil Square. If he and Sybil had been betrothed with due form and ceremony, they would scarcely have belonged to each other more thoroughly—perhaps they would scarcely have been happier—than they had been of late.

If Piers Coniston had not known this so thoroughly, his mind would not have been so sorely troubled that same afternoon. It had been such a pleasure to him, to watch the soft expectancy kindling in Sybil's great brown eyes as the hour for Hugh's coming grew near; and the delicate rose-tint brightening on her cheek when Hugh's step sounded on the stair. The thought that he might possibly have to check and change all this was hard to bear. Of course, without taking Hugh actually to task, he might have administered serious and salutary warning. But, himself exceeding sensitive, Piers carried consideration for the feelings of others to a morbid extent. Besides this, he did not greatly believe in the continence which proceeds of fetters; and, of all forms of legislation, admired least the prohibitive.

However, if in other respects Coniston was culpably weak, it does not follow that he was also infirm or un-

certain of purpose. On one thing he was absolutely resolved, that no child of his should, with his knowledge or connivance, play a part in that ancient tragedy which has been produced in every tongue spoken by man, and on stages where the meaning of the word drama is unknown—the Gambler's Wife. Only, whilst his conscience pricked him a little for moral cowardice, he told himself that the time for action was not yet, and that it would be both juster and wiser to wait awhile, and see whether this last fancy of Hugh's might not turn out a mere fever fit rather than an outbreak of the hereditary malady. At any rate, the evil of this dreary November day should suffice for it.

Piers Coniston reached this turning-point in his meditations, and the door of the club that he most affected, simultaneously : he halted, and hesitated for a second or two, and then went in. As a rule, he liked to be at home at least an hour before dressing time, and this hour was not the least pleasant of the twenty-four. It was always spent in his library, with Alice at his knee, telling or listening to a fairy story, for which style of narration both father and daughter had quite a talent. This, too, was the usual hour of Hugh Standish's visits ; and, after he and Sybil had had their private conference up-stairs, they usually came down to the library to play audience. One could hardly fancy a cosier little *coterie*.

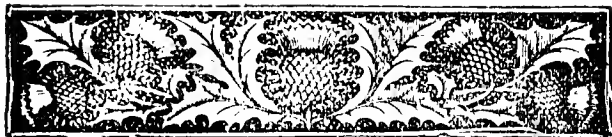
To-day Coniston seemed in no special hurry to get home. He dallied in the morning-room of the "Sanatorium," glancing at the papers as they came in, and chatting with certain of his friends and acquaintances, who were only too glad to find him in a talking humour ; for his conversational powers, in a subdued way, were still much appreciated. He reached home barely in time to dress for a dinner-party to which he and Sybil were bidden.

So, unless he had kept her late from her rest, he would have had no opportunity of confessing that night any of his misgivings. He had, however, no such intention ; and, though for days afterwards he went about with a guilty conspirator-like feeling at his heart, he dissembled so successfully, that even Sybil, who was used to study her

father's face as weatherwise folks study the barometer, never guessed that aught had disquieted him.

The cloud-bank on the horizon for the present rose no higher; nevertheless, for all it looked so pacific, there *was* that in its bosom which might change the aspect of a *sky* even more bright and serene.





CHAPTER XXXV.

BUSINESS.

IF any of those tricky fairies who avenged the rape of Belinda's lock watches over the Albany, she must certainly be a candle-light beauty; for, betwixt dawn and darkness, the *religio loci* is certainly somewhat oppressive, and a stranger, traversing that severe colonnade, will be apt to realise that the "shadow of aristocracy" is indeed somewhat "cold." A cynic, being consulted by a friend as to whether this would be a good place to live in, answered: "I don't know much about that; but it would be a first-class place to die in." And perhaps there were some grains of truth in the irreverent reply. The wildest dare-devil, if he lay long sick in one of the ground-floor chambers, might find his spirit greatly toned down to a sad solemnity befitting the occasion.

Nevertheless, Art is powerful to amend; and the apartment which we enter now—sombre in itself—is wonderfully brightened up by the fashion of its garniture. A trophy of rare arms faces a glazed gun-rack over the fire-place; and the walls are so well covered with shooting and hunting memorials, interspersed with choice water-colours and a few good cabinet pictures, that not many vacant inches of the emerald-green paper are visible. The fire, too, blazes cheerily; and, at a table drawn up near it two men are

lingering over rather a late breakfast. These are Hugh Standish, tenant of the said chambers, and Horace Morland.

Hugh is much changed since you saw him last ; and, at the first glance, you would say changed for the better. His figure has gained in strength and squareness without losing elasticity ; and his face is certainly improved by more firmness of outline, and by a trim moustache, which defines rather than conceals the short upper lip ; his full blue eyes are clear and frank as ever, but they do not seem to sparkle quite so joyously ; and, three years ago, his brows had never worn such a frown as knits them now—a frown, however, rather of perplexity than anger.

That these two have been conversing on some difficult or disagreeable topic is very evident ; this fact, however, has not spoiled the host's healthy appetite, and he has made a very satisfactory meal when, at a remark from his companion, he pushes his plate away impatiently.

"Then it is clear that you cannot help me," says Hugh, with a certain sharpness of tone, and ringing for coffee with unnecessary impatience.

Morland, too, has finished his breakfast ; and, dipping his fingers into a water-glass, dries them delicately, one by one, as he makes answer.

"'Cannot' is just the word for it. Thinking over it coolly, you will see I have absolutely no choice in the matter. But, even if my own hands are tied, I might possibly point out someone able and willing to help you, and in the way that you desire. That would come to much the same thing, would it not ? Very well. Then listen quietly ; for it is full time I were moving Citywards."

Into the business details ensuing it is not necessary to enter. It will be sufficient to state the tenor of their past converse.

His run of ill luck at the "Chandos," though it had not hitherto been marked by any single heavy disaster, had been so persistent, that Standish's available resources were well-nigh drained ; and fresh supplies would very soon be required for his every-day needs, to say nothing of the sinews of war. Now, though "anticipation" on his part had been somewhat strictly provided against, in this financial question, if he had referred it at once to his trustees, or even would have allowed

them to be cognisant thereof, there would be no real difficulty. But when you learn that the chief trustee was Coniston, Hugh's obstinacy on this point, howsoever blameable, may not seem so strange. It was precisely because he felt so sure that "Uncle Piers" would open his own purse to him generously—fettering the benevolence by no condition, and chilling it by no reproach—that Hugh was so determined, at any cost or sacrifice, to avoid seeking that aid. No misgiving, that he could be perilling his position with regard to Sybil, at this time crossed his mind. He was thinking solely of her father, when he felt within himself that he would rather meet Harpagon in his den than those sad, searching eyes. But with this feeling neither shame nor fear had anything to do. It was simply a reluctance to vex the gentle, kindly heart, as he knew he would vex it; though—not being well read in his own family traditions—he never guessed that, had he borne another name, Piers Coniston, hearing of those "Chandos" doings, would only have smiled, or, at the worst, shaken his head, in mild disapproval. Before, however, resorting to usury, Hugh bethought himself of one who, with a little good will, might easily pluck him out of the slough. Like many others of his class, he had perfectly irrational ideas of the potency of City magnates. He knew that Morland, if he had not yet attained that dignity, was already a man of mark in the East; and, as the other had always treated him with cordial amity, he had that morning unbosomed himself with no small confidence, and was proportionately disappointed with the result.

Morland refused his financial aid decisively; not in the least alleging any lack of resources, but averring roundly that to interfere in a matter in which his senior partner was gravely interested would be a breach of commercial, if not of personal honour. Hugh's notions on such points were to the full as nice as his neighbour's; but he had not seen the question in this light; nor, though he tried honestly to understand the other's reasoning, did he quite succeed in doing so. In the fact of his requiring money he recognized no disgrace, and—Uncle Piers once out of the way—he looked upon the matter purely as a commercial one, involving no great obligation on either side; for, though he knew little of business, he knew that his securities were

in reality good for twenty times the amount he needed. And he knew too, that, in due course, the debt would be paid to the uttermost farthing. However, he forbore to press the point; and listened quite patiently whilst Horace sketched out for him a plan of action.

Standish was to consult a certain solicitor, whose address in Lincoln's Inn Fields Morland wrote down on one of his own cards, who, if he undertook the business at all, would carry it through on equitable terms. The idea of applying to any professed money-lender, Jew or Gentile, the speaker scouted as utterly puerile.

Having said his say, neither tediously nor hurriedly, Horace rose to depart. He put aside the other's thanks carelessly; alleging that a good breakfast was overpay for such good offices. But, though his smile was quite sunny as he nodded adieu, he contrived, without any affectation of reserve, to evade a hand-grip at parting. *Nemo repente fuit turpissimus*; and Horace Morland had so much left of self-respect, that henceforth he would refrain from bestowing needless signs of amity on the man for whose feet he had just laid his first snare, and who, if wishes could slay, would some minutes ago have been lying stark by his own hearth-stone.

Mr. Marriott, the solicitor aforesaid, to whom Standish resorted that same afternoon, by no means fulfilled the usual conception of a financing attorney. There was not a trace about him of a Semitic origin; with his ruddy cheeks, portly figure, and twinkling eyes, he looked like a well-preserved country squire, somewhat past middle age, whose daily walks abroad lay through other fields than those of Lincoln's Inn. He just glanced at the card which Hugh presented as his credentials, and put it aside; remarking that his acquaintance with Mr. Morland was very slight, and simply professional, but that the introduction was amply sufficient. Moreover, the name of his visitor was familiar to him; for it appeared that he was in constant correspondence with the chief solicitor of the county town, only a few miles distant from Chearsley, the family seat of the Standishes, where Hugh's widowed mother now resided.

So the business in hand marched swiftly and smoothly. Mr. Marriott used none of the stock phrases of the dis-

counting trade. He did not affirm that money was scarce in the City, or that a client on whom he could otherwise have relied had just put out a large sum on interest ; but stated, very briefly, the terms on which the loan could be advanced. These seemed to Hugh exceedingly moderate, especially as the only security required was his simple note of hand. Had he been like Bonnycastle's horse-coper, "well versed in numbers," he would perhaps have been still more surprised.

"*Bis dat qui cito dat*," the solicitor concluded ; rolling out the syllables sonorously, as if not sorry to show that he too had studied his Latinities. "Solomon never indicted a truer proverb than that. Mr. Standish, if you will call here any time to-morrow afternoon, the money shall be ready for you. I think I might make a shrewd guess for what purpose it is required, and your reasons for raising it without the cognisance of your trustees. But these are quite beside the question. If young shoulders always carried grey heads, our profession would be a poor one."

Hugh was much pleased—not so much at attaining his object as by the courteous readiness with which his wishes had been met ; and he expressed himself to this effect with some warmth. But the other's manner suddenly grew more formal and constrained.

"Pardon me," he said gravely, "you are under no sort of obligation to me. I have considerable sums at my disposal ; and I never advance a shilling, unless I am thoroughly satisfied as to the security. But, Mr. Standish, I must fetter this loan with one condition, which, perhaps, I ought to have mentioned before. I must have a clear understanding that, in the event of your requiring any further advances, you will apply in the first instance to me, before opening negotiations in any other quarter whatsoever. It is my duty thus to protect my client, as we have been satisfied with your simple note of hand. But you need sign no written engagement to this effect ; I shall be happy to take your word of honour."

Hugh laughed outright—a round, ringing laugh, such as is not often heard in legal chambers.

"Not a very hard condition," he said. "I can't say that I hope to come here again on a like errand ; but I should be very sorry to go elsewhere. I will pledge myself to what

you require without the slightest reservation ; and **I think** you are quite safe in trusting to my word."

He drew himself up ever so slightly as he spoke ; and, as he stood there, he looked so gallant and loyal, that something like a twinge of compunction plucked at the old lawyer's tough heart-strings ; and, just for a second, a warning hovered on his lips. But it never passed them. "Business is business," he thought ; and the sole trace of that transient kindly impulse was seen in an additional constraint of his manner during the few minutes longer that the interview endured.

Hugh walked westwards again, with a much lightened spirit, and a conviction that he had done a good day's work.

What a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive,

quothe the Lord of Fontenay, when his schemes began to go awry. And for once, of a surety, that felon knight spoke sooth. Aye—so tangled that, toiling throughout all that remains of life with all our soul and strength, we may never unravel it ; and many threads will remain sorely twisted whilst our dying fingers pluck at them in vain.

To such a piece of craftsmanship, Hugh Standish had unwittingly just set his hand ; and yet—he went on his way exulting.

If the doleful music of man's lamentation provokes a smile from those who "lie beside their nectar," do they always refrain from scornful laughter when he shouts aloud in his joy ?





CHAPTER XXXVI.

PLANS FOR CHRISTMAS.



ULETIDE, in a festive point of view, has now been nearly "improved away;" but, in those days, intellect did not march quite so overweeningly, and in not a few country houses

They kept their merry Christmas still.

Notably at Herncourt was this so; and only once since Coniston bought the fine old place, had he and his household failed in meeting the season seasonably: this was when his grief for the dead Ida was in its fresh agony. For the last two years, Alice—now fast developing into a most coquettish little maiden—had been queen of the revels; and she led them right royally, with Hugh as her prime minister. Mrs. Standish, too, though at other times loth to move beyond her park gates, invariably spent her Christmas here. Only, indeed, by making this compromise could she spend it with her son; for, though Hugh would have obeyed her summons without a murmur or a black look, she had not the heart to bid him leave gay Herncourt for sad sober Chearsley.

And yet the doubt uppermost in Coniston's mind, as he sat in his library musing by the fire-light, was whether he ought to think of spending this special Christmas at Herncourt at all.

His disquietudes on one subject had been increased, rather than diminished, of late ; for, besides the information supplied with much seeming reluctance by his partner, chance remarks dropped by others made Piers feel sure that the germs of the hereditary malady were developing themselves fast in Hugh Standish. Those afternoon visits of his to Devorgoil Square, which a while ago had been regular as the course of the sun, had grown uncertain, if not rare ; and his manner, beyond question, was altered. Instead of chattering in his own lightsome fashion, he talked often in an hurried, excited way : and did not always answer quite to the purpose. Even his face, too, seemed changed. It was not haggard or worn as yet, but it looked very anxious, at times ; and now and then his lips would quiver involuntarily—a very ominous sign to such as remembered his father well.

Now it was manifest that a Christmas spent in healthy country air, amidst healthy country ways, might be the best possible antidote to the evil leaven now at work : nevertheless, in one sense, the experiment might be too costly. Though Hugh Standish was very near to Coniston's heart, there was another nearer yet, whom he was bound to consider. When he ordained that nothing like an engagement should subsist betwixt Hugh and Sybil for the present, he had been actuated only by a vague prudence, and a regard to the youth of both. But the case was widely different now. If, after all, the lives of those two must remain separate, it would be cruel kindness, for a brief space longer, to draw them closer together. Afternoon visits in town, ever so regular, are very different from the intercourse of a country house, where only the family, or close familiars, are assembled, and where over the most ordinary objects falls the rosy light of pleasant memories and ancient kindness.

Nevertheless, the idea of a Christmastide at Herncourt, with no Standish face to the fore, seemed to Piers so impossible and unnatural, that the spending of it elsewhere was almost an easier alternative. But, to find a reasonable excuse for this last course, was a supreme difficulty. For Coniston's domestic rule was by no means an autocracy ; and there were few personal sacrifices that he would not have accepted, rather than defraud his children of one of the pleasures he deemed their due.

It was very hard to see light anywhere ; and his thoughts were still in the very midst of their maze, when the library door opened behind him. A light step, scarcely audible on the thick carpet, drew near, and a light hand rested on his shoulder.

Of all the personages in this story—excepting, perhaps, her sister, who is a mere “walking” young lady—the last few years have perhaps least changed Sybil Coniston. Indeed, if her slight figure had not become delicately rounded, and her carriage slightly more erect, you might fancy this was the morrow of her adventure in the sea-nook near Fulmerstone. And just the same smile—rather tender than mirthful—hovers round her lip as she bends forward to kiss her father’s brow : and the low sweet voice is not altered by a semitone.

“I’ve told Alice not to come down just yet. For I want you all to myself for ten minutes, dear ; and you must put on your best business-look at once. Mrs. Bryant and I have been making out a list of what is to go down to Herncourt ; and we want to be rather more extravagant than usual this year, if you think we can afford it. So you are to go through this carefully, and then answer the truth, and nothing but the truth.”

She drew a broad footstool forward as she was speaking, and sate down, so that her head rested against the arm of her father’s deep lounging chair, whilst her face was a little averted. Without speaking, he took the paper and tried to do as he was bidden ; but words and figures swam before his eyes, which had suddenly grown misty ; and, after a second or two, he laid the paper down, sighing heavily—so heavily, that Sybil turned and looked up in frightened wonder. Albeit his mood was always rather pensive than gay, in her hearing, such a sound as this had never issued from her father’s lips since the close of the year in which her mother died.

“It was not my fancy, then,” she said, “or the fire-light. You *did* look pale when I came in. What has happened ? Darling—whatever it is—you will not keep it from me, I know.”

He stooped, in his turn, and kissed the upturned face, lovelier than ever with the quick, startled look upon it.

"Did I frighten you?" he said fondly. "That was only a tired sigh, I believe; for I've been thinking a little too long—you'll never guess what about. I was thinking whether it would break your heart and Alice's, if we spent this Christmas here instead of at Herncourt. If I remained in town, Morland might make a flying visit to Rome. His mother's health, I hear, grows more precarious daily."

The terror had left her face, but the wonderment abode there still; and, added thereto, was a shade of petulance. Thus far, Sybil was innocent of hatred, malice, or grave uncharitableness: nevertheless, she had her likes and dislikes; and amongst her favourites her father's junior partner decidedly was not reckoned.

If she could have divined that, from the instant Horace Morland set eyes on her rare beauty, he had coveted it with strong desire, in which no mercenary impulse mingled—for, to give him his due, the man was no heiress hunter, and if Sybil had been brought to utter penury none the less would he have sacrificed wealth and honour, and his hopes hereafter, to win her for himself—if, I say, she could have divined all this, would she have liked him better or worse?

The question shall be left open for each feminine reader to answer after her pleasure.

Howsoever this might have been, the idea of all their family arrangements being altered to suit Mr. Morland's inclinations, were they never so duteous, vexed Miss Coniston's spirit exceedingly. Her temper, sweet and even as a rule, was by no means of the Griselda type; and it is probable she would have spoken her mind somewhat freely, if the expression of her father's face, more than the motion of his hand, had not checked her.

From their very infancy, Coniston, encouraging in his children the most perfect frankness and sincerity, had always backed up precept by example. Sybil especially, before she was far advanced in girlhood, was entirely in his confidence; and only one secret—which was hardly a secret—had he hitherto withheld from her. That conversation in which Standish made his petition and submitted willingly enough to certain delays, Piers had kept to himself—requiring from the other a like discretion. That reserve seemed wise and prudent enough at the time, but it made the position

infinitely more difficult now ; and, after all, the precaution was rather shadowy than substantial.

With all his failings, Hugh was scrupulous on the point of honour as any that have buckled on spur : and had he been fettered in nowise, he would have refrained just as carefully from seeming to claim, either by word or deed, the very lightest of the privileges of affiancement.

I will but say what all friends may say,
Or—only a thought stronger.
I will hold your hand but as all others may,
Or—so very little longer.

Those honest, homely lines—useful for quotation otherwheres than in print—express fairly enough his recent relations to Sybil. The pleasantest familiarity existed betwixt them ; but it was a cousinly familiarity—no more. Only at those happy Christmastides, under mistletoe license, had his lips touched her cheek lightly and reverently.

And despite of all this, was it any secret to Sybil that Hugh Standish loved her above all earthly things, and looked forward to calling her wife as the sum of his earthly happiness ? Nay—had she once doubted this, or mistrusted him in anywise since that morning when, nestled in the niche of rock, they watched the ebbing tide ? Set forms of betrothal were surely needless here ; and she was as little suspicious as exacting. Truly those afternoon visits of Hugh's had, of late, formed the chief pleasure of her daily life ; and, as her father had noted, the very sound of his step brought a softer light into her eyes and a brighter colour on her cheek. But, when he came seldomer, she never, even in her inner consciousness, felt plaintive or reproachful. He was busied or amused elsewhere, she thought ; and, in either case, it was well. Indeed, popular as he was amongst his fellows, it was only wonderful that he spared so much time to Devorgoil Square. The change in his visage and manner she certainly had not observed. Neither was this strange ; for, whatsoever his preoccupation, whilst actually in Sybil's presence, Hugh was able to shake it off and be his old self again. It was when he was left alone with her father, that these symptoms of a mind ill at ease were most apparent.

Of all this, partly by observation, partly by that marvellous parental instinct that surpasses all science of psychology, Piers Coniston had been made thoroughly aware ; therefore, judge what it cost him to pull down the first stone of the edifice, builded up under his own eye till it became very fair of seeming. Nevertheless, the words set down above were scarcely uttered when his conscience smote him sore. Till now, in no matter, grave or gay, had he put off either of his children with vain pretext or false excuse ; and there was savour of both in that last sentence. What he saw before him was hard to bear ; but anything was better than the consciousness of dealing deceitfully with his own flesh and blood. So he went on hurriedly, with the courage that not seldom springs of sharp mental pain.

“That is one reason, but not the chief ; there is another. I could not fancy Christmas at Herncourt without the Standishes ; and—and—I do not wish Hugh to stay with us just at present.”

Though he was not touching her at the time, he felt that Sybil shivered as she sate ; and her head was averted, drooping a little as if some grave fault had been laid to her own charge.

“What has he done ?” she asked almost in a whisper.

There was little of Jephthah, or even of the Roman father about Coniston ; and his heart sank within him as he answered.

“Nothing base or wicked, you may be very sure ; nothing that he need be ashamed of, or that many people would even blame him for. But he is walking on dangerous ground, and I fear—I fear—for him more than I can say. My own darling, I must speak plainly at last, though I have spoken late ; you will listen patiently, for you know I *could* not be hard to him any more than to you.”

Then, with infinite tenderness, yet using great frankness, Piers made his confession, for it almost amounted to this. He avowed that for years past he had contemplated the union of Sybil and Hugh, and desired it so earnestly, that he felt as if to no other living man could he bear to surrender her. That he had watched day by day every sign of their growing attachment, and rejoiced therein exceedingly ; and that it had cost him no small struggle to insist even on brief

delay in the matter of affiancement. Then, without saying how the ill news had reached him, he went on to explain his disquietudes of late, how that symptoms, which in others might be of little moment, in one of this race were of fatal import; and how, though well aware that gentle remonstrance might make Hugh break the evil habit for the present, that he could never feel safe as to the future till it was proved that this man, howsoever strongly tempted, was not likely to follow in the footsteps of his forefathers. He did not recite the formulas for such cases made and provided, and affirm that "he would rather follow his daughter to the grave," etc., etc. He simply said that no earthly consideration should induce him to trust her happiness to an habitual gambler, calling himself Standish. And, as he spoke these "brave words," his voice faltered miserably, and quite broke down at last.

And all this while Sybil sat still as a statue, gazing steadfastly into the fire

With desolate eyes open wide.

Her cheek had flushed feverishly when her father began speaking; but it was pale enough long before he ended. Still keeping her face averted, she put her hand back and found his, and drew it forward till it rested against her neck. This had always been a favourite attitude with her, since she had been used thus to drop off into a day-sleep, when recovering from some childish illness. Since her mother died, she had never been confronted with a serious vexation, much less with a grief; and when sorrow "came upon her as an armed man," her first thought was not for herself, but for the pain she guessed her father had borne and was bearing now.

"Poor darling," she said, softly; and pressed her lips on his hand as it lay there. Then, after a brief silence, Sybil spoke again:

"He has been playing of an afternoon?"

The words were trifling enough, but the tone was very piteous. It was the first, the very first, grave disillusion of her life; and, though the cause thereof may be afterwards quite forgotten and forgiven, such effects no more pass away

than trampled flowers recover fragrance and bloom. If Sybil Coniston up to this hour had kept her girlhood, thenceforth she was a woman—no more exempt than her fellows from the burden of watching and weeping.

So, whilst she fancied him unavoidably detained or taking his pastime at least healthily and honestly, he was poring over his cards amongst veteran gamblers (in her simple conceptions whist was always associated with grey hairs); and their society was so much the most attractive, that he could not spare her one short hour out of each twenty-four. And, even whilst he was with her he probably wished himself elsewhere; for certain slight signs and tokens of wandering thought on Hugh's part, which she had scarcely noticed at the time, came back upon her now vividly. In fine, she was thoroughly discomforted and disappointed.

"I conclude so," Coniston answered, wearily; "but I have asked no question of late. I have heard enough, and more than enough. The luck of beginners does not seem to hold in his case; and this is a good thing, perhaps, if ~~there~~ there can be any good in such a matter: for his own resources must be exhausted soon, and, before borrowing, he would surely consult me. Then I might speak."

"And might not I speak, before it comes to that?" Sybil pleaded. "Indeed, I don't think I could meet Hugh now, and pretend to be quite unconscious of all this. He is sure to begin talking soon about Christmas and Herncourt, and then ——"

The tears would have way, and the small proud head drooped lower and lower. Mr. Coniston's wise resolves were shaken to their base, and—hardly refraining himself from unconditional surrender—he was only too ready to make some concession.

"Do as you will, my own child," he said caressingly; "I can trust you now as always. Only do not ask a promise from Hugh. He has never broken one yet, and, if he were to do so now, it might be the turning-point of all. No man's case is hopeless whilst he keeps his self-respect. Now dry your tears, and look up at me bravely again: perhaps we may spend Christmas at Herncourt after all."



CHAPTER XXXVII.

A CHECK.

TRULY, the mission with which Sybil had charged herself might have puzzled a more experienced diplomatist ; for it was needful to step warily over much difficult ground. Inasmuch as Hugh had never, in so many words, alluded to their engagement, it was impossible to speak of it even as a remote contingency ; and yet, if it was altogether ignored, it would be almost impossible to account for the change in the Christmas arrangements. However, the luck that often makes a haphazard speech more effective than a laboured oration, stood by her bravely. It was, at any rate, easy to open the subject ; for Hugh's face, when he came on the morrow, would have told tales, even to one not forewarned, or inclined to peruse it searchingly : his manner, too, was restless and preoccupied ; and though he tried, as heretofore, to shake off the burden of his thoughts, the effort now was manifest.

"You look very tired, Hugh," Sybil said tremulously, after a long pause had ensued. "It's quite clear sitting up does not agree with you ; and you've been keeping the most dreadful hours, of late, I hear."

As he glanced up at her quickly, his countenance wore a dark, troubled expression, widely different from its usual frank *insouciance*.

"You have heard that ? And what more have you

heard? And whom have I to thank for tale-bearing here?"

His tone was defiant rather than contrite, and Sybil's high spirit rose incontinently.

"Perhaps you might thank the world in general," she said. "I suppose there are gossips at the 'Chandos' as well as elsewhere; and for want of other scandal, they will talk about the high play and high players. I do not know when or where papa first heard your name mentioned, but he only spoke to me of this yesterday. Do you wonder at his speaking of it?"

The defiant look had left it, but his countenance was still heavy and depressed.

"No, I do not wonder," he answered, slowly; "only I wish ——"

He checked himself there. An innate honesty was still alive and strong within Hugh Standish. What right had he to impute to Piers Coniston want of frankness or plain dealing, when his own prime object throughout had been to keep—if not his "Chandos" doings—at least their consequences, from that other's knowledge? Sybil divined his first thought, though she was far, indeed, from divining the last.

"You wish he had spoken first to you," she said. "Why, even when you were an infant in law, Hugh, did he not always shrink from thwarting or tutoring you? And why should it be different now, when he has not the faintest right to control you? But, if you had seen his face yesterday, you would not think he had ceased to be anxious about you."

The better part of his nature, for the moment, absolutely prevailed. Assuredly he looked penitent enough to satisfy an austere judge, as he took Sybil's hand and kissed it reverently, as a devotee might salute the saintly relic towards which he has made long pilgrimage.

"*Confiteor*," he said, forcing himself to speak lightly. "I have been to a certain extent 'possessed' lately; but I am sure, to-day, the evil spirit is cast out. I seem to long for rest above all other things; and Christmas at Herncourt never looked so attractive as it does just now."

The long dark lashes drooped, till the deep brown eyes

were quite shrouded ; and the colour flashed into Sybil's cheek as from a quick dart of pain.

"It is not certain that we are going to Herncourt at all," she said, in a very low whisper.

Hugh actually started. The keenest upbraiding would have been light penance for his past folly compared to the simple suggestion of that doubt. He was by no means wise in his generation ; but a certain delicacy of tact furnished out his lack of sagacity ; and the true state of the case struck him instantly. This was fortunate ; for, with all her good-will, Sybil would have found explanation simply impossible ; and Hugh—to do him justice—divined this with the rest. He felt like one who, having kept late vigil, through a curtain drawn unawares, stands suddenly face to face with the full fresh morning. He had been wagering deeper and deeper of late, but he had never meant to play for such a stake as this ; and the consciousness of having done so unwittingly shook him sorely. He drew his hand across his brow in a dazed bewildered way, and seemed to muse a little. Then he looked up with the old frank light in his eyes, as if he saw his way clear at last.

"Is there a doubt about it?" he said. "I think the doubt will not last long. I won't make any promises, Sybil ; but you and Uncle Piers shall see."

And Sybil—some women are so easily satisfied—felt immediately quite confident and content ; and, after a little talk on trivial subjects, saw Hugh depart much earlier than his wont, without a single misgiving.

This man, to his hurt and peril, was assuredly unstable in his resolves ; but, whilst the metal of his purpose was hot, he could sometimes strike with good force and aim. Before the world was a full day older, it was known to all whom it might concern that Standish's heavy running score at the "Chandos" had been cleared to the utmost farthing, and that in the list of its members his name was reckoned no more.

Considering that he belonged to about half-a-dozen other clubs of more or less high repute, we may affirm that history records more notable instances of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Yet you would scarce have thought so, had you listened to Coniston's comments thereon and Sybil's replies.

However, though these simple folks exulted in secret thus above measure, they were wise enough to refrain themselves in Hugh's presence. When he came next, Sybil only said—"You are very, very good," whilst her hand rested in his a little longer than its wont; and, only by a more marked warmth of welcome, did her father betray his great contentment.

Morland, and no other, brought to his senior this last piece of news from the "Chandos." The mercantile model knew, as well as most people, how to make a merit of a necessity and profit of a disappointment. On the present occasion, his facile smile did not fail him; and Piers, who, much as he trusted and respected him, had no great love for his clever cousin, felt as if he had never yet done the other justice, whilst listening to his glib praises of Hugh's timely firmness.

But when, a couple of hours later, in the solitude of his own chambers, Horace flung the mask aside, you would scarcely have known the bland, genial face again; so charged was it with black, bitter malignity.

"So that string has snapped," he said, half aloud, as he roused himself from his reverie and prepared to go forth again. "Well—the bow it not quite useless yet."

Not, since the Yule-log was first lighted under the tall carved mantel, had a cheerier circle, in all outward seeming, gathered round it than met at Herncourt that cold Christmastide; and sweet Alice herself was not more eager than her sworn squire in ail their masks and revels.

Nevertheless, when Hugh Standish was quite alone at night, he sometimes felt little inclined for slumber; and, at such seasons, there would come over his face a look of restless craving. Such a look, perchance, long after his rescue from the elves, might have haunted the eyes of the good knight, Ethert Brand, when, sitting amidst his kinsfolk, he looked back, with a strange guilty longing, to the weird country where once he lay under glamour.



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A YEAR OR TWO OF MARIETTE'S LIFE.

THE house was of a pattern, till within the last dozen years, not uncommon in the Court Suburb. It stood close to the road, it was true ; but the road—little more than a bye-lane, kept in excellent order—was almost innocent of public traffic. On this aspect, it looked formal even to grimness, with its long narrow windows cased in dingy stone : but a pleasanter face was turned to the square plot of trim garden in the rear ; and here, the dull uniformity of russet brick was mitigated by frequent creepers and massive ivy. The whole place wore a prim, decorous look, and something solemn withal. You could not fancy any rude roisterers or revellers dwelling there ; but rather a bevy of demure little maidens under tutelage of some sour precisian.

Yet, to such an use this mansion could hardly have come ; for no boarding-school rules, howsoever liberally construed, would sanction nocturnal visitors, or tolerate the scandal of carriage-lamps gleaming over-against the portals till they paled in the dawn. Not every night, but about thrice in each week, these outward signs of vigils within were visible ; and, on these occasions, no large company assembled—scarce numbering a score, all told. But any one cunning in heraldry, studying the panels of the vehicles stationed there, must have divined that *non cuius contingeret* to enter there ;

and the visiting list of "The Elms"—if it owned such a vanity—must have held names that the haughtiest Belgravian dame would scarce have scrupled to inscribe on her own, even if she had not sought them eagerly ; for almost every one bore the stamp of wealth, rank, or fame. Visitors by day were rare, though not exceptional ; but it might have been noted that there was not much variation in their faces, and that they were invariably of the ruder sex.

For somewhat more than a year, this house had been held by its present tenant—a certain *Baronne de Vintimille*.

Of the antecedents of this personage, little or nothing was known. The bankers in Paris to whom she gave references, answered readily for her solvency. Indeed, shortly after her arrival in England, she opened a large account with the great house of Bullion and Co. ; and this had gradually enlarged its borders till it began to command respect even there, where they are used to large balances. Her rent and her tradespeople were paid with a precise punctuality ; and her establishment, though not extensive, was admirably mounted and liberally maintained.

Inasmuch as not one of her familiars would have troubled himself to test the genuineness of her title, we may leave that point open ; but, assuredly, nothing in her manner betrayed a plebeian origin ; and, though she could never have been beautiful, she was still very pleasant to look upon, in mature middle age. Though she affected rather a quiet than a gorgeous style, her attire was exceeding costly ; and the few gems that she wore were both rich and rare.

Madame de Vintimille did not keep solitary state at The Elms ; for she brought thither a companion of her own sex, who since had permanently resided there. This other was no humble dependent, or well-trained sheep-dog, but an equal—to say the least of it. In truth, on the rare occasions when their opinions chanced slightly to differ, it was not the elder dame that oftenest prevailed. Perhaps you will not wonder at this, hearing that her associate was no other than Mrs. Clyde.

It is not worth while to trace, link by link, the chain of circumstances that drew Mariette here. That her life, during

the past few years, had been eventful, follows, of course ; for a tranquil, placid existence was with this woman a simple impossibility. The briefest sketch of its main features may suffice.

Within a twelvemonth of their parting, Mariette heard of her husband's death in South America, whither he had proceeded in some subordinate mercantile capacity. As might have been expected, a strange climate, and strange drinks, made short work of a constitution already shaken to its core ; and Leonard went down helplessly under the first fierce fever fit. The news came through the public journals ; for neither then nor thereafter did the Clyde family seek to communicate with the widow : indeed, save in the matter of paying her scanty jointure regularly through the appointed channel, they entirely ignored her existence.

Mariette made no vain pretence of mourning ; and, if she donned weeds for a brief while, it was probably more to confirm her own position, such as it was, than out of any respect to the dead. For—odd as it may sound—in that anomalous country, whose frontier she had crossed already, authentic marriage-lines are a valuable passport, conferring on the bearer certain privileges and precedences, such as were supposed to attach to “chrisom children” beguiled into Fairyland.

If it was a sin to carry her widowhood so lightly, there came quick and sharp retribution ; for, in the year ensuing, there lighted on Mariette certainly the heaviest blow that she had yet sustained—no other than the loss of Pete Harradine.

After the events recorded above, this pair had retreated to the Continent, and thenceforth led a roving life, beating up all their old quarters, and other resorts where the Pactolian stream flows through uncommercial channels. It cannot be affirmed that anywhere they acquired much honour or esteem ; for, though Harradine's evil repute at home did not follow him everywhere, even his foreign patrons looked upon him as a semi-professional ; and, if they courted him in the saddle, were apt to slight him elsewhere. And Mariette—more reckless than ever in talk and action—could scarcely count on much amity from her

own sex, or deference from the other. Nevertheless, her peculiar temperament kept her safe, or comparatively safe ; for though, wheresoever she went, she was the source of much light or bitter speaking, no special scandal attached to her name.

However, so long as they scaped the "scathe," these bold adventurers recked right little of the "scorn." In truth, the Pirate winnings, instead of melting rapidly, as heretofore, waxed in volume like a rolling snowball, and their joint luck held up to the very day when it turned once for all.

The steeple-chase course—it was near Erlau, in Hungary—was certainly a dangerous one ; not so much from the size, as the artificial character, of most of the obstacles. However, Harradine had ridden over scores of such, and weighed in with his usual saturnine confidence, though his mount was anything but a pleasant one—a raw star-gazer, with a mouth of iron, and forelegs like pipe-sticks. At the fifth fence—a narrow rotten bank and ditch—they came to grief. Pete knew how to fall as well as any acrobat, and thought no more of a common "crumpler," than ordinary hunting folks do of a "peck" or stumble. But now, unluckily, right in his tracks a hair-brained Magyar, also on a puller, came tearing down ; and —— the result may be divined. Out of that horrible embroilment of struggling hoofs Harradine emerged, with only just enough of life to enable him to linger through a month of intense pain.

He bore it all very patiently, or rather doggedly : his chief concern was to spare Mariette, who was an indefatigable nurse, as much trouble and wakefulness as possible ; and to her his sole anxieties related. The joint wealth of the pair consisted entirely of securities portable and easily convertible ; so a will was superfluous. But Harradine displayed more than his wonted shrewdness of forecast, in planning and arranging for her solitary future.

His mind, however, wandered a good deal towards the end, and, as the agony drew near, went quite astray, or rather, perhaps, back into the old worn track. From his last audible words, it was evident that he fancied himself in the saddle ; and his fingers worked as though gathering up tangled reins.

"Don't let go her head," he muttered; "she frets worse than ever this morning: don't let go her head till I can feel my stirrups—it's so bitter cold. And listen"—his voice sank into a hoarse confidential whisper—"put it on as heavy as you please, and see no fear. We are going straight *this* time, by ——"

Whether in those final syllables there was a dreadful unconscious irony, only He can tell whose name was then, for the last of many times, taken in vain.

It is hard to fancy any person, being of the world worldly, left more entirely alone than was Mariette Clyde after this disaster; and, for once, that dauntless spirit of hers fairly sank within her. Unless she wasted her substance rashly, she needed not to fear poverty; and furthermore, she was—as she had often longed to be—absolutely free. Nevertheless, for some time after Harradine's death, she felt much like a voyager wrecked on a lonely isle, where there is no lack of sustenance, who looks forth, day by day, over the sullen waters that swallowed up the last of his comrades awhile ago.

This depression and despondency, however, did not long endure; and, when Mrs. Clyde appeared in Paris later on in the spring, no one would have guessed that any harm had befallen her. It was here, and at this time, that she became acquainted with Madame de Vintimille: similarity of tastes led first to intimacy, and then to close confederacy. The wily Frenchwoman was not slow to perceive what a useful coadjutrix she had found; and was ready to requite her services with more substantial guerdon than petting and flattery. Mariette was apt to be a little impatient and imperious at times; but, on the whole, they got on excellently well together.

You now know sufficient of the inmates of The Elms to glance at their interior.



CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE INTERIOR OF "THE ELMS."

THE architects of the Georgian era, with small conceptions of grandeur, had liberal notions of space; and, in many modern mansions of far higher pretensions, there would not be found such an imposing reception-room as The Elms could show. The chief saloon on the first floor traversed the house from east to west, and was scarce sufficiently lighted by a large window at either end—the one towards the garden front being a deep bay. The room, indeed, would have seemed disproportionately long, if its continuity had not been broken into two unequal parts by *portières* of dark velvet, so thickly wadded that, when closely drawn, they would deaden any ordinary hum of voices. The furniture of both apartments was alike, and less remarkable for sumptuousness than for extreme comfort. Each *fauteuil* seemed, in some wonderful fashion, to adapt itself at once to the favourite angle of repose of its temporary tenant; and the ordinary chairs were of a pattern rather uncommon then—solid, well stuffed, and slightly concave, the very opposite of those fragile straight-backed abominations, to which no full-grown male could trust himself without misgivings as to his weight. In the larger compartment, facing towards the garden, was one rather remarkable piece of furniture—a

long oval table, narrow in proportion to its length, that would have been quite in its place in a dining-room, or possibly a library, but here harmonised ill with its surroundings. A cover, gorgeous in colour and embroidery, sweeping the carpet with its golden fringe, on which throughout the day stood vases brimming over with rare flowers, somewhat mitigated the ill effect: still the incongruity was patent.

In the smaller saloon—for even when the *portières* were partially looped back, the two were practically divided—on a certain February evening, Mariette Clyde was sitting with one companion. It was dreary weather without; for the last frost of that season had just set in, and a keen north wind was making havoc with the brittle branchlets of the old elms; the very night whereon would be thoroughly appreciated a cozy fireside. And very cozy they looked, those two—in their arm-chairs drawn up close to the hearth, and so close to each other that there was scarcely room betwixt them for a *guéridon*, on which coffee and liqueurs were placed. The fire at their feet was not coal; for this useful mineral Madame de Vintimille could not abide, deeming it fit only for kitchen use. But the choicest of black diamonds never flashed forth such brilliant prismatic flames as rose from the blazing oak-billets, saturated with sea-salt to their core.

Nevertheless, it was evident that the wheels of their converse had not rolled wholly on velvet; for as she stirred her coffee—more than cooled already—mechanically, Mariette's brows were bent; and there was a cloud of perplexity, if not of anger, on her companion's face.

A very notable face it was, not more for its rare beauty than for its peculiar character. The features were delicate, even to effeminacy; but the fiery dark eyes were all masculine; and so were the thin, firm lips, shaded by a strong moustache—blue-black, like the crisp, abundant hair. A face of the purest Eastern type, without a taint of the Jew, such as may still be found among the spurs of the Caucasus. But, instead of the dusky or sallow skin, usually accompanying such, here was a complexion so marvellously soft and clear, that it seemed as though it could never have been roughly treated by wind or sun.

The figure, too, with its slender limbs, graceful proportions, and fine extremities, might have belonged to some Sheikh or Emir, whose descent is traced up unbroken to the first dwellers in tents; and, though it had not the faintest foreign accent, the voice had a slow melody foreign to the sturdy Saxon tongue.

Looking at, or listening to, this man for the first time, you felt sure that in his life, though it was yet short of its full prime, there must have been a "story;" and you would probably have guessed aright, albeit the details, in their entirety, were perhaps known to no one living. A few men, and a few more women, could have furnished some sufficiently dramatic episodes; but these were isolated, and no one thus far had entered so deeply, or remained so long in Noel Tempest's confidence, as to be able to knit the scattered links together.

It was some ten years now since the world first heard of him in Paris, whither he came from Italy, in the train of the Marquis of Montserrat. That great noble seldom talked about his own affairs—seldom still about other people's. But by a few careless words he contrived to convey the impression that Noel was the son of an ancient acquaintance, lately deceased. Assuredly, about this time died, *pauper et exsul*, a certain Colonel Tempest, who had once been of the Marquis's set, and, like many other vessels of china ware, had paid dearly for the privilege of floating awhile through troublous waters alongside of that mighty δέπας ἀμφίκυπελλον.

But, if the story had been quite simple and straightforward, the boy himself would probably have been less reticent and reserved; for, both then and thereafter, Noel invariably evaded or repelled all questions as to his education and bringing up; neither, when he went to England, did he in any wise attach himself to the few surviving relatives of his reputed sire. However, no one had the slightest interest in making research into the matter. So his credentials were accepted to a certain extent, and this extent sufficed him; for he never affected general society, mixing, indeed, therein only so far as was absolutely needful to maintain his position. All his familiars were to be found in the artist-guild or in clubland. And here it may be noted

that some mysterious talisman had enabled Tempest, both in London and Paris, to pass easily through certain portals that his betters found jealously closed.

With his own set he was exceedingly popular ; for, lacking any special talent, he had many small accomplishments, and could discourse aptly, if not fluently, on most subjects. Perhaps his pleasant voice and pleasant aspect had something to do with it ; but, certainly, he had a wonderful knack of smoothing ruffled plumage. Under his skilful touch, seemingly discordant elements would mingle quite harmoniously ; and people who never met without wrangling, whilst actually under his influence would converse quite amiably. As for himself, a meek and quiet spirit could hardly co-exist with those fiery Eastern eyes ; but no preacher of peace ever had his temper under more perfect control ; and, though, on the Continent, he had twice drawn sword not in vain, even his opponents allowed that he had only yielded with a good grace to the force of circumstances.

He had no ostensible profession or resources ; but—living liberally and playing deep—he always seemed to have something in hand ; and, though he had never been known to borrow, had twice or thrice helped to pull a friend through a financial crisis. Considering his personal attractions, he had few personal enemies ; nevertheless, there were not wanting those who affirmed that his name was still inscribed on the Montserrat civil list. But no outward evidence supported these surmises. Tempest paid the marquis just so much deference as the differences of rank and age demanded, but not as if he owed either duty or gratitude ; and the latter, who was apt to take his money's worth out of each and every one of his pensioners, treated Noel with the same careless courtesy that—without the slightest distinction of rank—he extended to every male guest.

There was certainly a sort of mystery about the man, but not enough to be actually discreditable. The manœuvring mothers never troubled themselves to enquire into his antecedents or prospects, feeling that such would be utterly wasted pains. Indeed, towards all maidens on their promotion he bore himself as discreetly as the meekest of detrimentals ; and matrons, ever so frolicsome, he was

careful at least not to compromise. By dint of a little more ingenuity and persistence, he might easily have gained higher and firmer foothold in society; but he had never either exerted or constrained himself to attain this. On the whole, perhaps, he was regarded rather with indulgence than with favour; and, though none shunned his acquaintance, and he had troops of bachelor friends, with very few families could he be said to be intimate.

Tempest had been acquainted with Madame de Vintimille for years—with Mrs. Clyde some eighteen months. However, at the first glance, and before a word was uttered, you would have guessed that those two were on familiar, if not friendly, terms, and were not likely to stand on set forms of speech.

"How unreasonable you are," Mariette began. "You can't suppose I care a straw about the dinner; but these things are simply matters of business. We cannot afford, just now, to lose any of our *clientèle*; and you know his temper, and how easily he takes offence."

"Exactly," the other answered, his voice—even though he was angered—keeping its soft Tuscan cadence. "A peer, or even a baronet with a good rent roll, can afford to have a temper; a pauper can only afford to be 'unreasonable' sometimes, in strict *tête-à-tête*. When the company arrives, he must stand aside, and bow and smile whilst his betters pass in. I'm so nearly tired of it all."

Mariette's eyes gleamed, as if in triumph.

"Poor-laws were never made for such paupers as you, Noel; and I *should* like to know the luxury you have ever denied yourself. But—is it possible that you are growing jealous? I little expected to come to such honour."

He stirred in his chair impatiently, and a quick colour flew up into his cheek. Despite his stoicism, natural and acquired, certain signs of natural emotion this man could never repress; and the peculiarity had been, to some credulous folks, fraught with danger.

"Jealous? Hardly that. Perhaps, just foolish enough to dislike the notion of your assisting at one of Ormskirke's *parties carrées*. He has liberal ideas of hospitality, if all tales are true, and woos in the old seigneurial fashion; and,

though I've a great regard for our Baronne, I don't think much of her *chaperonage*."

She laughed rather bitterly.

"Fancy my requiring a *chaperon*, and fancy my not being safe anywhere! Why, the gipsy girls we saw in the South would go quite alone into the wildest company, and never were harmed; and I have the Zingara training, if not the Zingara blood. However, if you *will* be absurd, it is not worth a quarrel. Luckily, I only accepted conditionally, and an excuse is easy enough to find. But you must manage Félicie, who is sure to grumble; and—under supervision, of course—I must pacify Alured the Terrible."

She spoke without a trace of vexation or ill humour. In truth, she was more pleased than she cared to show, at finding that she could so trouble waters on which hitherto she had seldom discerned a ripple.

One of the chief charms in Noel Tempest's face was its marvellous mobility of expression. Looking at it now, you would not have thought it possible that a cloud had rested there two seconds ago.

"It is a good little creature," he murmured softly; "and I'm not quite so selfish as I seem. When I said, 'I was nearly tired of all this,' I was thinking more of you than of myself, I swear. If we could only get one real turn of luck—such a turn as one hears of every day, and as I have seen twice or thrice—would we not laugh at the beard of the Grand Llama? And it might come any day."

Her eyes brightened once more—this time, with the steady light of eyes used to look upon war, when the war note is sounding.

"It might—it *shall* come."

She rose as she spoke, and, coming behind Tempest's chair, leaned over it, much as she had leant over Clare Archbold's on the evening you wot of. But, now, her hand rested frankly and freely on her companion's shoulder, and her cheek on his brow.

If in this pose, or in the converse preceding, any should find cause of offence, I will pray them, of their charity, to reserve judgment for awhile; premising only that, howsoever guilty in other points of the Decalogue, in this one Mariette

Clyde was blameless. From the beginning to the end of her story, not a single breach of the seventh commandment shall be implied or expressed; and, if ever appearances should seem to lead to a different conclusion, remember that even the heart of man is less deceitful than these





CHAPTER XL.

"OUR FINANCIER."

AS was aforesaid, visitors, in the ordinary sense of the word, were rare at the Elms : indeed, several familiar enough with the aspect of the house, both within and without, under mellow lamp light, would scarce have recognised it by glare of day. But from the very first, Noel Tempest had been made free of the place, coming and going as he pleased, at all sorts of abnormal hours. The well-trained domestics had long ceased to wonder at or comment on this, and, furthermore, clearly understood that it was not a matter to be spoken of abroad. They were stolid, silent personages, both male and female ; for Madame de Vintimille was choice in her selection of servitors, and, in return for her liberal wages, required something more than diligence and sobriety. No gossips or talebearers might abide under that roof-tree : if any such crept in, within a very brief space they were safe to be detected and eliminated ; and there was great discretion of speech below stairs, simply because each distrusted his or her fellows.

So, though it was still forenoon when Tempest stood under the old-fashioned porch, the staid, sable-clad elder who admitted him betrayed no surprise ; but, bowing low, "effaced" himself, and suffered the visitor to pass into the dining-room unannounced.

At a well-spread breakfast table, fragrant with exotic flowers, Madame de Vintimille sat alone; for, though another cover was laid, Mariette had not yet put in an appearance. Even at this early hour she was carefully and richly attired; indeed, it had been said by her familiars half jestingly, that on the suddenest of night-alarms La Baronne would be sure to come forth from her chamber in an array precisely fitted to the occasion. She had not yet begun her meal, and her face was pensive, to say the least of it; very grave, too, were the velvety Provençal eyes. She brightened up, however, as the door behind her opened, for she knew the step very well, and smiled a welcome, as she stretched back her hand over her shoulder without turning her head. Tempest pressed his lips on the plump fingers before he let them go. Such ceremonious greeting of an ancient acquaintance was absurd, no doubt; but those graceful foreign ways of Noel's had first recommended him to this lady's favour; and, though there had never been the faintest "love passage" betwixt them, she was really attached to him in a semi-maternal fashion.

"You are matinal, *beau sire*," Madame de Vintimille began (she spoke English fluently, but with a pronounced idiom and accent), "and you bring bad news, without doubt: good news never hasten themselves."

He shook his head as he passed her, and leant forward over the table to pluck a gardenia from the centre vase.

"Your penetration errs for once, *ma mic*. I know your hours here, and I would have kept back ill tidings, at least till you had breakfasted. No: my news are good on the whole. I have seen our financier, and he is amenable this time—under conditions."

A long breath showed that under Madame de Vintimille's pleasantness of demeanour lurked much secret care.

"And the conditions are hard?" she asked.

"Not so hard as eccentric, it seemed to me," Noel replied, "and rather unpalatable. But, personally, you are not at all concerned with them. You shall hear all about it when that sleeping beauty deigns to come down; meanwhile I shall usurp her place. That *poulet à chasseur* just matches my appetite."

But, though Mariette appeared before any of the savory

meats had grown cold, Tempest did not again refer to business till the breakfast table was cleared, and the trio were established in their favourite arm-chairs in the bay window, lighted up just then by some soft spring sunbeams—for a wonder, it was a bright thaw. There, with expense of many cigarettes, Noel unfolded his budget. For the better understanding of this it will be necessary to look a little backward.

For many years past—indeed ever since Frascati's, and the meaner *inferni* of the Palais Royal, were suppressed—Paris has contained divers *tripots de haut ordre*, where the amateurs of games interdicted by the law of the land and the law of the Cercle, may nightly satisfy their longing. Cases of foul play in such establishments were, of course, by no means rare: but they seem to have been the exception rather than the rule; for the profits, direct or indirect, of the contrabandists were such, that brief immunity from police interference enabled them to set the same at naught. The presiding genius—apparently, if not actually—was usually a lady endowed with some personal attractions, engaging manners, and a title, not the less high-sounding because it was home-manufactured; and very often she would be as discriminating in her invitations as if she had by right belonged to the Faubourg St. Germain. It is well to speak in the past tense, because, since Baccarat has been sanctioned at the clubs, and men can ruin themselves as quickly as they please in open day, and in the most respectable society, the occupation of these charitable dames is to a certain extent gone; but, in the days of which I write, not a few such flourished exceedingly.

La Baronne de Vintimille had never, during her residence in Paris, acted as high priestess of these unholy mysteries; but she had long ago been admitted behind the veil, and had gotten by heart all the sacrificial secrets. So one day she bethought her, that to set up a temple of her own in or near the benighted British capital, might be a venture both profitable and pleasant, and not over perilous either; for she argued, with some reason, that such an institution, from its very novelty, would, for a time at least, be safe from suspicion; and that at the eyes of insular

detectives were not likely to be keener than those of her native *mouchards*.

When the scheme was thoroughly matured in her own busy brain, she took two persons, and two only, into her confidence—Mariette Clyde and Noel Tempest.

The first could not only supply the capital, which the Baronne, despite her cleverness, invariably lacked, but also just the attractions most likely to fascinate such a *clientèle* as Madame de Vintimille proposed to secure. For personal vanity never stood in the way of this astute lady's real interests; and, though she still made a brave fight against time, she was not blind to the fact that her days of coquetry were nearly numbered.

As for Tempest, he was the very associate she would have selected, even if his experience of London society, and extensive acquaintance, had not made his co-operation invaluable. Furthermore, though she was by no means clear as to the relations existing betwixt these two, she had a shrewd suspicion that it would scarcely be wise to confide to the one any secret not meant to reach the other's ear.

That Mrs. Clyde should approve of the project was natural enough. She had no social position to lose; from her childhood upwards, she had lived in such a whirlpool of chances that the staking of the chief part of her worldly wealth, with a fair chance of doubling it, gave her small concern; and a life of constantly varied and constantly recurring excitement was in itself a temptation hard to resist.

Noel Tempest's zealous adhesion was less easy to explain. His income—from wheresoever derived—apparently sufficed his needs; in his daily existence there were emotions enough, one would have thought, to satisfy even a morbid appetite; and his footing in society was not so secure, but that even a faint whisper affecting his reputation would imperil it. Neither could he look to any certain compensation; for contributing nothing to the venture beyond countenance and counsel, he could, of course, expect no share of the profits; and, when play was proceeding, would have, like the rest, to take the chances of the cards. Nevertheless, if he had been a desperado at his last shifts, he could not have cast

in his lot with the other two more readily. It could only be accounted for by the devilry innate in the man, or by some impulse known then only to himself, which may perhaps be made plainer hereafter.

Be this as it may, the scheme was carried out according to Madame de Vintimille's original plan, and had thus far thriven fairly, though not without some grave vicissitudes. This was no wonder; for, during her Parisian career, she had become acquainted with divers "milors," all of whom appeared sooner or later at the Elms, whilst few failed to repeat their visit. Indeed, it was not necessary to be a gamester to find the house attractive. The *cuisine* and all other appointments were simply perfect; Mariette Clyde was even a greater success than La Baronne had reckoned on; and, more than all, men went there with a certainty of meeting their equals, if not their familiars: for Madame de Vintimille's circle was exceedingly select, and assuredly did not include a single knight of the "industrial" order. She herself never touched any game but whist. She played this superbly; and, perhaps, even the "Nemesis" could not have produced a better rubber than was made up, regularly as her "evenings" came round, in that cozy front saloon. An air of good society pervaded all the arrangements; and even from that other apartment, where the votaries of *lansquenet* or *baccarat*—then scarcely known in England—resorted, no ruder sound than light laughter came through the closed *portières*. For all the *habitués* of the Elms were either naturally, or by force of example, *beaux joueurs*, and were equable under, if not equal to, either fortune.

That such an establishment could not be maintained at small cost was evident; and, though a certain revenue accrued regularly (of which more presently), as the play was absolutely loyal and very high, a run of bad luck would leave but a weak reserve in the coffer of the small syndicate. Twice, indeed, only temporary assistance from without had enabled them to tide over the perilous time; and, on both occasions, it had been furnished by the personage alluded to by Noel Tempest as "our financier."

These details may suffice to enabled you to comprehend the position that morning, when the three sat in conclave.



CHAPTER XLI.

ANOTHER STRING TO THE BOW.



YEARS ago, when the great national game of "Poker" was played along the Mississippi for unlimited stakes, a gamester, whose pile was sorely shrunken, took up an absolutely "sure" hand. Leaving the table for a few seconds on pretext of sudden giddiness, he sped across the street into the office of an eminent banker, and required the instant loan of some thousand dollars.

"On what security?" the other asked, dubiously.

"On four aces," was the reply; and the money was promptly forthcoming.

Few, however, of our City folk are imbued with the full spirit of American enterprise; and if any of his mercantile associates, or West-end acquaintances, had been told that the junior partner in the house of Coniston had in any wise aided or abetted such a venture as was then in progress at the Elms, they would probably have treated it as a malicious calumny, or rather a mild jest. Nevertheless, the "financier" in question was he, and none other.

A prudent man in the main, and exceedingly cautious when acting for the firm—Morland had always had a weakness for small investments on his private account, where, with a limited risk, large profits might accrue. Though by no means a regular attendant at her "evenings," he had

been duly presented to Madame de Vintimille, and had, from the first, conceived a very high opinion of this lady's sagacity. She could hold her own with the best at other games than whist, Horace opined, and a few hundreds left in her hands would be tolerably sure to fructify sooner or later. He took an opportunity of thus expressing himself to Tempest, shrewdly surmising that the words would not be long in reaching the Baronne's ears, and thus paved the way to certain business relations which soon afterwards ensued. The sums advanced were not very considerable, and had been repaid much within the stipulated time, with the addition of liberal, though not usurious interest; so that all parties concerned had reason to be satisfied. But, upon the present occasion, it was a question of a more serious loan; and, truth to speak, Madame de Vintimille had felt somewhat uneasy as to the result of her application, till her envoy's first words reassured her.

"Now for his conditions," Noel went on, after giving some purely business details; "you would never guess them. He simply stipulated that a mutual acquaintance of ours—of Morland's and mine, I mean, for I fancy neither of you have heard of him—shall be introduced here as speedily as possible. He leaves the management of this entirely to me, and will provide the supplies the instant it is an accomplished fact."

La Baronne lifted her well-pencilled brows a little scornfully, though she was becoming more and more used to insular eccentricities.

"Is that absolutely all?" she said. "He is droll, our financier, but assuredly not difficult."

Mrs. Clyde moved impatiently in the deep *bergère* where she sat half reclining. She was looking wonderfully handsome that morning, and the *peignoir* of soft Indian silk, with *revers* of quilted satin, became her like a royal robe. Her eyes were as bright, and her complexion clear, as a country damsel's who never misses her beauty-sleep; and yet the skies were waxing grey to dawn before Mariette's head was laid on pillow.

"Mr. Morland is droll, you think, Félicie? To me he seems very insolent. What has he ever seen here that gives him right to look on this house as a *guet-à-pens*, into which

his enemies are to be decoyed and victimised at a certain price? You listened to those conditions, Noel, if you did not quite accept them. And yet—people say you are not long-suffering!”

It was evident, La Baronne stood somewhat in awe of her more impulsive associate; for she glanced sidelong at her other ally, as though beseeching him to take up the daggers. But Tempest did not immediately reply; and, whilst he smoked on indolently, his eyes dwelt on the animated face over against him in a pleased, appreciative way, like a *connoisseur's* admiring—not for the first time—some famous picture.

“Never waste anything,” he said, at last, with a mock sententiousness—“not even honest indignation: it might come in usefully some day. However, I took the same view of it at first myself, I own; and I took leave also to inform the amiable Horace that neither Madame de Vintimille, nor any of her guests—so far as I knew—possessed the faculty of directing or correcting fortune: so that if he had any grudge against this special “pigeon,” he had better send him to be plucked elsewhere. But he seemed even more surprised than scandalised at having been so misunderstood, and assured me that he had no grudge whatever against the man, or more interest in his losing than winning. The other, it appears, has lately forsworn play, and Morland has wagered heavily—with a third party—on the abstinence pledge being broken within a year. He thinks he has a good chance of winning if Standish once finds his way down here; and I think he is about right.”

Mariette's expression entirely changed, as she leaned forward eagerly.

“What name was that? You do not by any chance mean Hugh Standish?”

“Precisely,” Noel retorted, somewhat surprised in his turn. “Then you *do* know something of him, it appears?”

“Very little,” she said, sinking slowly back into her former posture. “I never interchanged a word with him in my life; but I used to see him often enough—years ago. It does not in the least affect this question, of course. I confess I spoke rather hastily just now; the financier's explanation sounds plausible, and that ought to be enough

for us. I see no earthly reason why Mr. Standish should not come here and take his chance with the rest."

Did it not in the least affect the question?

Then why did Mariette's thoughts travel swiftly on the backward track till a certain scene was reproduced so vividly, that she almost seemed to hear again the moan of the rising wind and the wash of the rising water? Not twenty seconds had passed since she heard that name, and the ancient malice had waked again; and the vague sense of an injury unrequited—a dishonour unavenged—a debt uncanceled—was strong as heretofore. Possibly her turn was coming now; and, ere long, she might laugh—and laugh last—when the eyes were heavy with weeping that had, with never a tear in them, fronted the threatening sea. The sunshine glinted down brightly as ever on her red-gold hair; but all the brightness had gone out of Mariette's face as she sat there, so deep in musing that the talk of her companions floated past her meaningless.

Madame de Vintimille, who, since the matter was first broached, had not been troubled with a single scruple, once secure of her friend's assent, became voluble in exultation; and Tempest listened tranquilly and complacently, like one receiving barely his just due of praise. At any rate, both were too well employed to notice Mariette's reverie till she herself spoke again.

"Is he married yet—your Hugh Standish?"

Something in her tone made the innocent words sound like a bitter irony, and waked Tempest's suspicions once again.

"Not that I ever heard of. But one can never be certain in these matters now-a-days," he answered, with a flash of humour in his eyes. "Indeed, I fancy that he is popularly assigned to the famous beauty of last season—a Miss Coniston. You must have seen her hundreds of times, and remarked her too. There's nothing handsomer out, in the quiet thoroughbred style. But I'll hunt up materials enough for a complete Standish biography, if you'll only confess why you take such an interest in the man. To speak the truth, I know very little of him at present, though we meet often enough at the 'Nomads,' and I anticipate no great difficulty in bringing him here. But in private inquiries, above all, where there's a will there's a way."

She threw back her head like one who, by force of will, would shake off some physical oppression, and laughed mutinously.

"You shall hear the whole story some day, when I'm in the narrative vein, and you'll say you never listened to such childish nonsense. Meanwhile, you may be quite sure that it is not for *ses beaux yeux* that I interest myself in Hugh Standish. Now we must be business-like. There are several papers I want you to look at, when Félicie has quite finished with you."

So the house went then and there into committee.





CHAPTER XLII.

ALURED OF ORMSKIRKE.

IT is something past midnight, and Mdme. de Vintimille's "evening" is in full sway.

In the smaller saloon, facing to the front, you will find only the quorum of six, necessary to make up a single complete rubber. Potent and grave, if not very reverend seigniors are these; addressing themselves to their favourite recreation with as much earnestness as many people bring to the practice of a serious profession. Yet it is a recreation in every sense of the word; for the stakes, high as they are, are of no real moment to any one man present there, and very rarely do those well-trained faces betray a sign of depression or triumph. If opinions should chance to vary on any nice point, it is a case of difference, not of discord, and such a thing as a wrangle is absolutely unknown; neither would any twist to his own advantage, by one hair's breadth, the letter of their Draconian laws.

Something of this decorum may be imputed to the feminine influences always regnant there. Of a truth, in Mdme. de Vintimille's presence, any outbreak of temper would be almost inexcusable; for she herself, in this respect, is a model worthy of all imitation. When reverses come, she meets them with a gracious smile, just as she would greet an entering guest; from the firm red lips never escapes an

angry or plaintive word ; and, though over a long uphill game they may wax more vigilant and keen, there is never trouble in the soft Provençal eyes.

On the whole, however, she seems rather a favourite with Dame Fortune ; and, furthermore, she starts with a slight advantage—in this wise. She has not the royal privilege of selecting her own partner—such a choice indeed would have been often embarrassing, if not invidious—but, by general consent, to the deal is attached the honour of playing with the hostess, besides the possible profit of winning seats and cards. And this is by no means an empty honour ; for, as was aforesaid, her game is on all points nearly perfect—wary, as a rule, but on occasion, quite ready to dare. Indeed, Godfrey Parndon, after half a century's experience, gained in all the chief cities of Europe, has been heard to affirm that, “if he were forced to play for his life, he would ask no more favourable conditions than these.”

In this room, as a rule, a stillness, which is almost silence, prevails, and the proceedings, to any disinterested bystander, would seem rather tame ; so we will pass on through the *portières*.

The contrast is very striking. Issuing from a kind of religious twilight, and a hush as of a temple, you come at once into the fulgence of many tapers reflected in mirrors and metals : and all around you there is a hum of voices not over loud, whilst not seldom a light laugh breaks in. Over the long centre-table hangs a great swinging lamp, so shaded that the full power of the light falls on the dark green cloth which has replaced the gorgeous coverlet. The sitters round this table, if only in a representative point of view, are worth noticing.

That tall man, blond of beard, benign of countenance, and heavily spectaclled, who looks like a *Herr Professor*, is a Thuringian magnate, ruling, with almost sovereign powers, a territory broader than most English counties. Yonder Cherubim with the budding moustache, rosy cheeks, and innocent eyes, claims cousinship with the House of Hapsburg, and bears scarce less haughty quarterings. That eager face—quaintly irregular, yet pleasant withal—belongs to Gaston de Keramour, who, during long service here as Secretary to his embassy, became quite insular in his tastes

and attachments : since he came into his heritage, and went out of diplomacy, three-fourths of his time, and nine tenths of his revenues, are spent on this side of the Channel ; his feet are more familiar with the pavement of Pall Mall than with the asphalte of the Boulevards, and Newmarket knows him better than Chantilly. There sits Prince Koutscikoff, owner of a hundred villages along the Volga, and ready to stake the fairest of them on the turn of a card ; incessantly in search of all manner of excitement, at the very crisis of each he always preserves that cruel, insolent serenity. The forefathers of that dark, keen-visaged man sailed in past Hell Gate with Hendrick Hudson ; and the *fredaines* written against his name on either side of the Atlantic, might make those decent burghers stir wrathfully in their graves. Mark that portly personage with beetling brows, heavy jaw, and something bulbous lips, who has just taken up the cards. If there is any truth in the maxim, " Water comes to the river," he may well smile confidently ; for a few words of his—spoken at random or half in jest—would thrill through the fibres of European finance from the Irish Sea to the Euxine.

The purely British element need not be described in detail ; but you will notice that the Hereditary Legislature is well to the front—that the Lower House is not ignobly represented—and that, though Themis sends but one delegate, he bears a famous, if not an honoured, name.

The players are not the only occupants of the long saloon. Some three or four men seem to find sufficient amusement in watching the chances of the game ; two or three—late arrivals these—linger near a bright wood fire ; and, on a remote corner sofa, one *tête-à-tête* is in progress.

That one of this pair—no other woman being present—is Mariette Clyde, you would easily divine ; but it scarcely follows that her companion should be Alured of Ormskirke.

The old Avenger, like other despots, has caprices of indulgence ; and, assuredly, Time has dealt with this reckless noble more gently than he has deserved. He carries his tall head just as gallantly, and his brawny chest just as squarely, as when he strode out from under the fir-trees on Baron Down ; the full brown beard flows evenly and amply, without a fleck of grey ; and the broad brow is not yet

deeply furrowed. There *is* a change, however—a change, of which none save those who study the man closely, would be aware. His eyes have grown harder and eviller : in mirth or humour they gleam not so readily as of yore ; but they are more apt to kindle wrathfully, more apt to darken covetously. That easy good humour which made him so popular—too popular for his real interests—is not seldom broken now by fierce bursts of temper ; and certain ancient family retainers, who had suffered under his tyrannous sire, have been heard to observe of late, shaking their heads dolorously, that “if Viscount Alured only lived long enough, he would show himself ‘a true chip of the old block.’”

There are signs of a storm on his countenance even now, you see, though of a storm subsiding ; and his voice, though carefully lowered, is scarce attuned to the concert-pitch proper to such a duet as this.

“It’s waste of time and patience, arguing with women,” says Ormskirke. “If you tell them what to do, and see that they do it, I believe they always thank you afterwards.”

Mariette laughs provokingly ; with her experiences, any ordinary exhibition of masculine temper disquiets her no more than a breaking wave does a petrel.

“Your time don’t so much matter, for you’ve plenty to spare ; but you really ought to be economical of your patience. You may be right in your principle, I daresay ; only, as this is supposed to be a free country, isn’t it necessary to establish some proprietary rights before carrying it out ?”

His eyes, dwelling on her face, grow darker and darker.

“And whose fault is it that I’ve none here ?”

Watching the deft flutter of Mariette’s fan, you would scarce have guessed that she had never set foot on Castilia’ ground ; not more significant was the gesture of that discreet Chancellor, who

Dallied with his golden chain,
And, smiling, put the question by.

“No one’s fault, that I know of,” she answers lightly. “Perhaps it’s a mutual misfortune, that our ideas on certain points don’t agree ; and mine are not likely to alter. How-

ever, I did not quarrel with you for your free speaking, and I don't mean to quarrel now. You know that La Baronne is no more a prude than myself, and that we must have had good reasons—politic reasons—for declining the pleasure you offered us. Surely you can understand, without having all the I's dotted. Some men would be rather flattered by the refusal ; but you haven't many small vanities, I own."

And that Ormskirke *is* flattered, is evident enough ; though he throws back his head impatiently, like a restive horse only half yielding to a caress, and smiles sourly, like one rather pacified than convinced.

"And yet you so nearly accepted. Are you sure that you two did not take a third into counsel ? If so, I'd give a trifle to know his name."

"Perfectly sure ; you need not offer rewards for imaginary criminals. Now you must let me go. There are two strangers here to-night, and I have not said a civil word to them yet."

Her lips never quiver or falter over the lie. But the bright colour fades a little in her cheek as she rises ; and, for a second or two, her eyes, as they seek out one face amongst those encompassing the centre-table, are as the eyes of a hunted deer.





CHAPTER XLIII.

AN EVENING AT "THE ELMS."

TO some, not the least attraction of the Elms was a certain mystery and discretion attendant on those midnight meetings. La Baronne's familiars, encountering each other in general society, rarely mentioned the house by name, speaking of it vaguely as "down there;" just as at St. Stephen's they speak of "another place;" and more rarely still was any reference made to the proceedings of over-night. Nevertheless, the existence of the place was, throughout a certain set, a thoroughly recognised fact; and it was also recognised that the *entrée* of those same saloons was by no means easy to gain; for the privilege of "bringing a friend" was entirely suspended here.

Therefore Hugh Standish was even more pleased than surprised, by Tempest's point-blank question—"Would he like to be introduced to M^dme. de Vintimille?"

"There is play there, of course," Noel went on, in his smooth, easy way; "but not the smallest necessity for joining in it. Several men never miss one of the regular evenings, and never touch a card; but you meet there some notable people, in their way, and it's the only house I know where they quite understand a supper. I shall be going there in half-an-hour or so; shall I drive you down?"

If the truth must be told, the earlier small hours had

begun to drag rather heavily with Standish of late. He did not, perhaps, actually repent having withdrawn from the Chandos ; but certainly the other clubs that he frequented seemed to him very dull by comparison, and whist, at crown points, he did not find seductive. He was that evening in just the frame of mind to catch at such a proposal as Tempest's, and he was even weak enough to feel flattered at having been thus distinguished from the crowd ; for Noel, though he could be genial enough at times, was rather reserved, than expansive, in his friendships. Of course, if Hugh had taken time to consider, or even to look the matter fairly in the face, he must have confessed to himself that he could not cross the threshold of the Elms, without breaking the tacit contract into which he had entered of his own free will. But of thus pausing, he was just then absolutely incapable. The mere prospect of such an entertainment made the blood tingle again in his veins. He had felt something like this as a boy, at his first visit to a theatre, just before the rise of the curtain. There was not the smallest necessity for his playing, he repeated to himself ; and then—declining in any wise to argue the point with his conscience—accepted with effusion.

So Hugh Standish was one of that group round the fire, towards which Mariette moved with hospitable intent. He had been presented in due form to La Baronne, but not to Mrs. Clyde, whose *tête-à-tête* with Ormskirke Tempest had judged it best not to disturb. As she drew near, Hugh had some vague impression that he and this fair dame had met before ; and it was rather the figure than the face that he seemed to remember. Yet, when she spoke, the voice was utterly strange to him. Her first words were the forms for such cases made and provided, and addressed to the other two lounging there. But soon she turned directly to Hugh, with a laugh in her eyes.

"We are not old acquaintances, Mr. Standish ; and yet I feel as if introductions would be out of place. We used to meet in highways and byeways so often, years ago. You have utterly forgotten my face, of course ; but I daresay you have not forgotten a certain nook in the Fulmerstone cliffs."

It was rather a bold stroke on Mariette's part, this wel-

coming of a coming guest with an awkward, if not absolutely hostile, allusion. But bold strokes were in her line, and she thought it better to let the truth take Hugh by surprise, than to let it dawn on him gradually. She judged rightly, too; for he felt, just then, rather penitent and ashamed.

"I am so sorry," he began; but Mariette stopped him, laughing outright now.

"Sorry for what? For having yielded to a very natural impulse, and for having done your *dévoir* afterwards gallantly? If it was an offence to forget that I stood by, I forgive you freely. Indeed, if I had taken to myself all poor Leonard's quarrels, I should have a long list of enemies; and the duties of widowhood—you didn't know I was his widow—hardly go so far as that, I think."

"It is very nice of you to put it so," he answered, rather relieved at escaping so easily; "but you must have thought me simply a ruffian at the time. Of course—I remember it all perfectly now; I remember reading of your marriage and of your father's sudden death, in the same paper, and thinking what a strange, sad wedding-day it must have been."

The other two men had moved away, and they stood alone by the fire now; but she answered almost in a whisper,—

"Yes, it was a black day for me, in more ways than one: but past is past; and, by dint of never looking back, one can live down almost anything. There must be *some* prizes in the marriage *tombola*, I suppose; and, according to all rules of romance, you ought to have drawn one before now."

He knew right well what she meant; and, under the inquiry of the bright tawny eyes, he felt his face flushing. Nevertheless, he made shift to answer lightly.

"Romance and real life are so very different now-a-days, that they might almost go by the law of contraries; and I think my story will be matter of fact to the end."

"I don't think so," she retorted. "But that's quite a matter of opinion. By-the-bye, I have met Miss Coniston driving several times lately, and each time I have wondered more that she is Miss Coniston still. She is so wonderfully beautiful."

That last was an injudicious move ; and Mariette herself recognised this instantly, as she saw her companion's nether lip quiver, and his brows contract ever so slightly.

It did, in truth, seem to Hugh something like a profanity, that Sybil's name should be even uttered here. Moreover, certain incidents of that sea-side adventure came back to his memory ; and he, in his turn, glanced keenly at Mariette, seeking to discover whether those fair words did not mark a covert sneer. She bore the scrutiny bravely, and, to all outward appearance, seemed to have spoken in perfect good faith. But, whilst he stood so at gaze, there rose up before him another face—a pure, delicate face, pleading warningly ; like that sweet phantasm which came gliding athwart the Corinthian shore through the wrecks of the battle, and lingered by the renegade's side whilst the cloud passed over the moon. If Hugh had followed the impulse of that moment, he would certainly have cast about for some pretext for making good a speedy retreat ; but, the next second, he was angered at his own weakness. Was he such an utter child, then, that he could not be trusted abroad without leading-strings—nay, could he not even trust himself ? He had come down here stedfastly resolved not to touch a card ; it would be time enough to repent when that resolve was broken. So he only changed the subject somewhat abruptly by inquiring if “Mrs. Clyde herself ever played.”

“Very, very rarely,” Mariette answered. “I find quite excitement enough in looking on. Shall we go and watch them now for a little while ?”

This was the very thing Standish had been longing to do for the last half hour ; but though, as a rule, he was not much cumbered with shyness, he had hesitated simply because he was not personally acquainted with anyone of the players, excepting Tempest and De Keramour. Now, however, he assented eagerly ; and five minutes later, with a pulse at fever-heat, he was watching the chances of the game.

Under the circumstances, some folks will be charitable enough to give poor Hugh Standish a certain amount of credit for standing fast, throughout that night, to his resolve ; for he did not, directly or indirectly, meddle with the play, and, after doing fair justice to a supper which more than answered

Tempest's warranty, he went his way homewards alone. But, for any rest which came near his pillow, he might have kept vigil with the others till dawn ; and, when he slept brokenly at last, always he was haunted by the same terrible temptation, and in dreams he made head against it no longer. The next forenoon found him more weary and feverish than he had ever felt after the latest of the Chandos nights ; and a brisk ride through the keen spring air, followed by a sharp bout at rackets, only just braced his nerves to their usual healthy tone. He was quite sensible of all this ; and yet he never so paltered with himself as to make it a question whether he would or would not, at the first opportunity, revisit the Elms.

Others, too, felt tolerably clear on this point—notably, Horace Morland, who, when he heard what had passed, laughed low and long, as if his wager were already won.





CHAPTER XLIV

AN UNPLEASANT PROPOSAL.

QUON the verge of a then fashionable quarter, stood, "betwixt court and garden," a vast dusky pile, so jealously walled and formidable of aspect, that, at first sight, it rather resembled a fortress or a gaol, than the town house of a great noble. But the lords of Montserrat had never loved the prying of vulgar eyes, and the regnant marquis was in no wise more amenable than his predecessors; indeed, by the addition of *chevaux de frise*, and heightening of parapets, he had materially strengthened the defences of his dwelling.

Montserrat House was none of those mansions, which, having intimidated the visitor by an outward grimness of aspect, surprise him by the comfort and cheeriness of their interior. Nothing could be grander than the galleries and presence chambers, with their fretted and frescoed ceilings, and priceless tapestries; but nothing could be drearier: an air, not of squalor—for everything was in perfect order—but of desuetude, pervaded the place. The very portraits on the walls—howsoever sprightly they might have issued from the limner's hands—looked bored and listless.

It was no wonder. Few steps noisier than those of the list-slippered housekeeper sounded through those echoing chambers; and only an odd *virtuoso*, from time to time came to cast envious eyes on the art-treasures buried there.

Ivo, ninth Marquis of Montserrat, construed *Noblesse Oblige* in his own peculiar fashion, and, amongst the duties of his station, certainly did not count hospitality. Such a word could not apply to his entertainment of the painters, singers, and musicians who ministered to his tastes; for, though he fed these satellites as royally as he paid them, the marquis took exceeding good care that the relations of patron and client should be maintained. He gave no state dinners, balls, or receptions: indeed, of late years, had he willed it otherwise, he would have found it not easy to fill the smallest of his saloons. The polite world that had louted so low to the Marquis Ivo when he began to reign, and long afterwards was ready with its homage, when it realised that neither pleasure nor profit was to be extracted from him, stood nobly on the defensive; and, with all decent family folks—to say nothing of his equals—the puissant peer was little better than a pariah.

He had not, perhaps, a single intimate; but a score or so of familiars—not including a few unlucky *umbræ*—came in regular batches to assist at the select banquets, for the preparation of which the Montserrat *chef* had a special talent. Royal and imperial offers, it was said, had been made to this renowned artist; but, when tempted ever so highly, he only shook his perfumed curls, and laid his hand upon his heart, murmuring that “it was too much honour, but that between Milor’ and himself it was to the death.”

When the guests arrived, they drove in, not through the huge lowering portals of the “court of honour,” but through a kind of postern leading into a smaller quadrangle, smoothly gravelled, where there was standing-room for some dozen carriages. In the wing adjacent, all the living apartments—properly so called—were situated. On the ground floor, beyond the vestibule and ante-chamber, came a dining-room and two saloons, nobly-proportioned but not uncomfortably large, and furnished with constantly renewed refinements of luxury: from the innermost of these a double door, heavily curtained, led into the private apartments of the host. That door had never been locked within the memory of man; it was guarded by no sentinel, and, perhaps, no verbal edict on the subject had ever been issued: yet no living being, except the marquis’s servants,

had passed in uninvited—much less unannounced; and, once within those curtains, he was safer from intrusion than Haroun al Raschid in the innermost chamber of his seraglio.

These private apartments took up both the lower stories of that end of the wing. But only one need be specially noticed.

A room of moderate proportions, and not in any wise remarkable for the richness of its belongings. Almost every Tyburnian mansion could display more costly furniture, but probably no treasure comparable with the least precious of the bronzes and enamels scattered about here; and the price in fee simple of one of the same gorgeous edifices would show poorly beside the value of those masterpieces on the walls signed by Boucher and Greuze. The windows look out on a spacious garden—or rather *plaisance*; for *parterres* there are none—where every shrub is in its place, and every grass-blade carefully trimmed; though neither dame nor gallant have sauntered there since the days of good Queen Anne.

Now, however, the velvet curtains are closed; and Lord Montserrat's arm-chair is drawn up near the silver andirons, on which the billets are flickering merrily; yet the atmosphere of the room is warm almost to oppression, and heavy, withal, with some subtle perfume.

This august personage is not specially imposing of aspect. His years are something more than autumnal, and there is a sere look about his meagre features, and a weary look in his wrinkled eyes: but there are no signs of debility as yet in the spare nervous frame that has outlasted and outworn many of robuster build; and his pale, slender hand was not steadier that morning, near two score years ago, when he met, at the *barrière*, the famous Florentine pistoller, and slew him on the first stride. The presentments of Sir John Chester, in "*Barnaby Rudge*," would give you a very just idea of his *personnel*: only those thin lips would not easily mould themselves even to a courtly smile, and—with the best intentions on its owner's part—you could never fancy that countenance benign.

Just now, something has evidently crossed the *marquis's*, humour; for the wrinkles round his eyes are more pronounced

and the veins verging on the temples are violet rather than blue. Very rarely indeed has he permitted himself, of late years, to betray stronger signs of emotion. His ethics are strictly of the Petronian school ; and he has learned to drain life's measure by delicate sips, rather than greedily or hastily, avoiding perilous excess in all things. So, to his anger, as to his pleasure, he brings a certain temperance—indulging both in a leisurely, inexhaustive fashion, with as little damage to his constitution as is consistent with the liberal gratifying of both.

On the opposite side of the hearth stands Noel Tempest, his crossed hands resting on a chair-back, and his head drooping forward. The attitude suggests humility, if not depression ; but, peering closely into his face, you might deem it rather sullen, than submissive, and there is a sombre light in the Eastern eyes.

The cause of their dissension — if such a word is applicable where such wide differences exist—is briefly this.

Albeit in public they met always on terms of formal courtesy, the private intercourse of these two was, on one side, at least, much more familiar ; and since he brought him to Paris, Lord Montserrat had never ceased to interest himself, after a careless, supercilious fashion, in Noel Tempest's welfare, besides furnishing him with an allowance more liberal than is allotted to many cadets of great houses. But this potentate required that every one of his pensioners, of whatsoever degree, should approve himself, on occasion, worthy of his hire ; and, howsoever the duty of each might differ, from all alike he exacted—obedience.

A few months anterior to these events, the marquis took it into his head that it was about time his *protégé* should be established in life ; and then he bethought himself that a certain solicitor, who had waxed exceeding rich in conducting all such delicate business as Montserrat did not choose to entrust to the family lawyers, was blessed with an only daughter. The suitability of such a match struck him at once, and chimed in with his sardonic humour. He had never troubled himself to glance at, much less to quarrel with, Mr. Lyon's exorbitant costs ; but he felt a grim satisfaction in the notion of some of those huge profits

reverting, indirectly, to his own coffers; for Tempest, his future once assured, would virtually be off his hands. The damsel, on inspection, turned out rather unattractive of person, and was reported, on good authority, to own a "temper"; but the marquis had his own ideas of the Holy Estate, and, in all sincerity, considered such details entirely beside the question. He was somewhat surprised at finding that Noel did not immediately and gratefully fall into his views; and wonderment soon gave place to wrath.

Both by temperament and training, this man was a tyrant, in the widest sense of the word. But from time immemorial there have been tyrants and tyrants. Austere History, no less than courtly Pindar, allows wide difference betwixt Phalaris and Hiero. Montserrat was never rough or violent towards his domestics, with whom he was rather a favourite, than otherwise; and towards his immediate dependents he was neither insolent nor oppressive, rarely forcing them to endure even verbal indignity. Much less did he use them after the fashion of that lordly roisterer of more modern times, who, they say, purposely kept his led-captains small; so that, when warm with liquor, he might maltreat them with impunity. But, on the other hand, since he began to reign, the marquis had altered the rule of *fais ce que voudras* into *fais ce que veux*. Not alone would he have his own way where he had power to enforce it, but he would have it without let, hindrance, or question; and resistance, ever so slight or passive, sufficed to bring out the darkest shades of his character.

On the present occasion, he had begun by taking a fancy into his head—not an ill-natured one either; but opposition, in the quarter where he least looked for it, had changed the whim into a serious purpose. And yet opposition is scarcely the word; for, up to this moment, no direct refusal had passed Tempest's lips, and his distaste for the match was rather implied than expressed. But, on various pretexts, he had deferred making even such languid advances as were necessary to gain the favour of Judith Lyons and her complaisant sirc. This, however, the marquis, in whose eyes half-service was an offence second only to open revolt, would not long endure. And so it has come about that the two are here *en champ clos*, with a direct issue betwixt them.

"You thoroughly understand, then?" says Montserrat, after a pause. "I am not giving advice to-day; I am giving an order, which you will obey or disobey, as you think fit. In the last case, you know your future. If you think you can live by your wits, try the experiment, by all means; but if it fails, don't come here whining for alms. I'd sooner give the money to"—he hesitates for a climax—"to the missionaries."

"Yes," Tempest answers in his soft, slow voice,—the strongest contrast to the other's stridulous tones,—“I quite take in the position. It would be hard to misunderstand your lordship's plain speaking. But there's the past, as well as the future, to be thought of; and I suppose I ought to clear off some of my debts to you before I aspire to independence.”

Montserrat's face is quite a study of disgusted incredulity.

"Surely you're not going to begin any cant about gratitude? Why, we shall have you street-preaching next. The whole matter lies in a nut-shell. It suits my fancy to draw out a programme; it suits your purpose, or it does not, to carry that same programme out. I only require a direct answer. After all," he goes on more irritably, "what in the devil's name do you object to? The girl's not a beauty. I hear, and more than half a termagant; but you'd tire of an angel's face, and an angel's temper, before the year was out, or I am mistaken in you."

"Possibly so," Noel assents equably; "and perhaps the young lady's person and temper are quite insignificant details. But I have a natural antipathy to lawyers and Jews, just as some people have to cats, and I don't fancy a father-in-law combining the essence of both."

An ugly smile gathers round Montserrat's lips.

"An instinct, eh? And how did *you* come by thoroughbred instincts, I wonder?"

Now for the first time, Tempest lifts his head, and looks the other in the face stedfastly.

"By inheritance, probably: it was about all my patrimony. And—now we are on that subject—if I were to fall out of your favour, before parting, I should ask of your lordship one question—who was my father? Colonel Tempest never would—perhaps he never could—answer me; but I fancy you are better informed?"

The ugly smile becomes an uglier sneer.

"I am sorry I can't gratify you," says Montserrat. "Why, boy, if you had asked your mother that question on her death-bed, I don't believe she could have answered it—truly."

By an odd inconsistency, the speaker, even whilst he utters the brutal taunt, winces, like one who feels the shooting of an ancient wound; whilst on the other's indifference it falls like a hail-drop on polished steel. The springs of filial affection in Noel's breast were not dried up, for a sufficient reason—they had never broken ground. Had he been ever so carefully trained, the fifth commandment must always have been to him a dead letter, or form of sounding words: for, whilst still an infant, he was, to all intents and purposes, an orphan; and of neither parent had he an impression ever so faint, or a memory ever so vague. If he had been inclined to take up the daggers in defence of a shadow, he would have done so more readily on behalf of the old Norman nurse, who had petted him in her homely fashion, than for that unknown woman to whom he owed nothing but her travail. But he was not given to beating the air; and, in very truth, he had from boyhood upwards so thoroughly realised his position, that his birth-stain vexed him no more now, than it did those bold Bastards of the olden time, who carried the bar-sinister so vauntingly through the press of knights. He considers that last remark in atrociously bad taste, but it does not rouse even inward resentment: besides, great nobles who loosen their purse strings liberally, are entitled to a certain amount of *franc parler*. So Tempest turns the corner of the conversation incontinently.

"It was mere idle curiosity," he answers, with a bitter half-laugh, "and not worth persisting in. If I am such an utter waf, I am the more your debtor, my lord. I am sorrier than you would believe to run counter to your wishes now, especially when, it may be, I am running counter to common-sense as well. Will you give me one more week to argue the point out with myself patiently? It is not a very long delay, considering the length of the engagement you want me to sign."

The marquis is still smiling sourly; but the wrinkles round his eyes are somewhat smoother, and those turgid

veins are of a fainter purple, and his voice, though strident still, is not so harsh as heretofore.

“Be content, take two weeks ;” (Montserrat is rather given to profane parodies) “only remember, at the fortnight’s end it must be an absolute yea or nay. Meanwhile, everything goes on as usual. You dine here on Thursday, of course, and if you call at Lyon’s office—I don’t insist on your going to his house—you will probably hear of something to your advantage.”

With a few more words of no import, the interview closes much more pacifically than could have been expected. Nevertheless, Noel Tempest carries out of Montserrat House a heavier heart than he brought thither.





CHAPTER XLV.

WHICH SHALL IT BE?

QUENCE more Mrs. Clyde and her chief confidant **are** sitting in council. The time, the place, and the surroundings, are nearly the same as when you saw them first together. But each bears a very different countenance: for Noel's expresses now something more than vexation—Mariette's, nothing less than mirth.

The most useful, certainly, if not the most brilliant, of this man's natural endowments, is a remarkably retentive memory; and he has taxed this to the utmost, so as to reproduce for his companion, almost to a word and a gesture, his recent interview with the "Grand Llama," (under this *sobriquet* these irreverent persons—strictly betwixt themselves—usually spoke of the high and puissant Marquis of Montserrat), and she has listened quite patiently throughout, without the slightest indication of anger or surprise; not more than once breaking in on the narration by remark or query: neither when it is finished, does she seem inclined to speak first.

"I don't know whether moral cowardice is more despicable than the other kind," says Tempest, moodily: "but I'm quite sure it's more inconvenient; for it comes into play so much oftener. Physical pluck enough to face a crowded crossing is about as much as a civilian wants now-a-days. Now, nothing in the world but moral cowardice prevented my

giving the Llama his answer at once. We get weaker instead of wiser every year—some of us. Why, when I was a boy, and had to go to the the dentist, my only idea, I remember, was to get it over. And now—I can't tell you how I hate myself."

She looks up at him with a strange serenity on her mobile face, and her voice, too, sounds strangely quiet and grave.

"You needn't call yourself hard names, Noel; for you don't deserve them. You would have been mad to have acted otherwise; for one never knows what might come of the shortest reprieve. You are no more a coward than I am, and we are both able—are we not?—to look things in the face fairly. Now, have you quite—quite—counted the cost of rebellion?"

He smiles rather satirically.

"I haven't gone very carefully into the accounts, I confess; it would be such waste of time and energy. The calculation of chances is very well in its way; but of certainties and necessities, one can only make the best. And I'm quite ready to make the best of this one—more than ready; for I wouldn't alter things by a hair's breadth, if all were to do over again."

Her face lights up for a second at those last words; but it settles down again, as she asks in a very low steady voice,—

"Is it such a necessity?"

In Noel's eyes there is much wonderment, and just a little displeasure.

"I don't know how much, or how little, Félicie suspects; but, if she put such a question, I should have doubted if she put it seriously. And you—well—I thought to-day, at any rate, I should find you in earnest."

"So I am—thoroughly in earnest," she answers, speaking lower yet. "Stop. I know what you are going to say; and—though these walls are deafer than most—don't say it? I've forgotten nothing—how could I? And still I want you to listen patiently. When I asked if you had counted the cost of defying the marquis, I knew very well you had not done so, because you *could* not. When you hear of people living by their wits, it sounds rather amusing. But wait till you've tried it, as I have seen it tried—and felt it, too. We were never actually starving, or fed on dry bread; but it would

have been easier to swallow most hard crusts, than the petty shifts and meannesses we were driven to sometimes. And then that life changes people so terribly. From what I've been told, I believe my own father was no worse in temper and disposition than the rest of his set, at first;—if you could only have seen him at last! It was different with poor Pete Harradine. He was born and bred to rough it, and small miseries hurt him no more than rain does a wild duck. Now just consider what sort of training for such a life has yours been? Can you ever remember considering what your dinner ought to cost, or drinking cold water till you had saved the price of a pair of gloves? And, if you wanted ever so much to work for your living, to what sort of labour could you set your hand, or your head, at this time of day?"

"I should be free, at any rate," he breaks in, impatiently. Nevertheless, it is plain he has been listening, and her arguments—such as they are—he does not care to dispute.

"Free? Yes; and so are the stray canaries that are found starved and frozen about the streets: they had better have stayed in their cages, and taken their bath and breakfast regularly. Even the tame hawks that get lost, generally come to grief, I believe; and you were never meant to be a bird of prey, Noel. Talk reasonably, at least, if you will not act reasonably. You know very well, that, but for one obstacle, there would be no question in the matter."

"But since the obstacle is there, and since I would not have it away?" says Tempest in a much gentler tone.

Mariette Clyde rises and leans over the back of her companion's chair, in that favourite attitude of hers: only now, her arms clasp his shoulders so firmly, that, without using some force, he can scarcely turn his head to see her face. And so she goes on speaking.

"You know I care for you, Noel; but—just because you are a man—you will never know how much I care. Not long ago I had a dream that I never told you of—I was sure you would laugh at me so: but you won't laugh to-day, dear. We were walking, you and I, along a mountain path, such as one sees in the Odenwald, with the steep hill-side on one hand, and on the other—nothing. All at once, the ground began to crumble under our feet, till we were left both

clinging to the same shrub. You did not seem to minded much, and I, somehow, did not feel frightened till I look it up and saw the roots of the bush drawing out. Then I thought to myself, "It might support one, though it will not two," and I whispered "good-bye" in your ear, and—let go. I seemed to be falling for ever, but it did not even take my breath away; and, before I touched ground, I woke. I have wondered several times since, whether I should be so brave in reality. I think I could be—I think I *can* be. Noel, I want you to act now as if I did not exist, as if I never had existed—for you; and, let one day in our lives—it was a happy day too, was it not?—be blotted out entirely."

"Do you mean that?" says Tempest, looking hard to his front, and speaking through his teeth.

"Yes—I—mean—it." Slowly and painfully the words are dragged forth, and the firm hands quiver a little whilst they tighten their clasp. "Ours would be a dangerous secret; but you know it would be safe in my keeping."

"And supposing I listened"—Tempest goes on in the same suppressed voice—"supposing I sold myself outright, what would become of you?"

"I cannot tell; I never touched ground in my dream, you know. But I will take all that risk, and take it gladly, rather than ruin should come on you through me. Thousands of women give their lives for their loves; I should like to give *you* just a little more."

Note again that same serenity, so utterly at variance with the reckless vivacity of her nature, that she wore during her last interview with Leonard Clyde. But, assuredly, it is not anger or contempt that makes her now so calm.

Tempest shakes the clasp from his shoulder not over gently, and, rising to his feet, fronts his companion—his black eyes all a-blaze. His placid demeanour is not kept for "company," as a rule; so, when it is utterly broken up, the effect is startling in proportion.

"If you thought it possible I could be such a scoundrel, giving me up wouldn't show much generosity. But we don't part so easily, *ma belle*. I know nothing about dreams, or parables, or fine sentiments; but I know this much. If everything else slips through my fingers, they'll hold

you all the tighter, and they'll hold on to the very end, by ——"

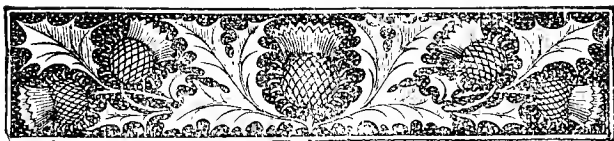
Many words, dulcet and musical, spoken in many tongues, have since her girlhood glided into Mariette Clyde's shapely pink ears ; but the choicest of these never thrilled through her as do those curt brusque sentences, almost brutal in their frankness. Assuredly, the very happiest instant in her chequered life has come ; though, as her head nestles down on his shoulder, her low laughter is close on the verge of tears, and she is panting like a hunted roe within ken of the water-brooks.

After all, the good, and great, and wise and wealthy ones have not the entire monopoly of the honest affections, and the delights of the veriest outcast are sometimes both simple and sinless. Owen Meredith has drawn not a few powerful pictures of human joys and sorrows ; but he never wrote lines truer to nature than these—

She was a harlot, and I was a thief ;
Yet we loved each other beyond belief.

So, for a little while—just a little while—the world, with its wisdom, its cunning, its policy, and its politeness, may, for ought these two care, wag as it will. But—being by no means of the Phyllis and Corydon type—they are not likely long to indulge in pastorals. As Mariette sagely observes —“ It's well to have *some* method in one's madness ;” and, before they part, Noel has consented, readily enough, when his reprieve shall expire, to make some show of submission to the Llama. It may not be easy—not possible even—to hoodwink them for long ; but there may be great profit in casting dust, even for a brief space, into those hard cruel eyes. For, with adventurers like these, the grains of the hour-glass are sometimes less sands of gold, than dust of diamonds.





CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PLOT THICKENS.



IN many of the Avernian slopes, to turn back would be almost easier than to stand still; and the guardians of those broad smooth paths are not much more indulgent to the travellers thereon than was the avenging angel to Ahasuerus, the wanderer of wanderers.

So you may guess how it fared with Hugh Standish during the month or so ensuing on his first visit to the Elms. The sophistries wherewith we beguile our neighbours are generally solid arguments, in comparison with those that we use for the purposes of self-delusion. And certainly Hugh's excuse to himself for breaking his resolve against play was an example of this truism.

In the notice above of those polite Parisian *inferni*, allusion ought to have been made to *la cagnotte*. Thus, in the *argot* of these resorts was called the receptacle—whether bowl, vase, or casket—into which the winners were, from time to time, expected to deposit a certain percentage of their gains. There was no absolute or written law on the subject; but the principle was perfectly understood, and tribute was seldom declined. The contents of the *tirdlire* passed, like any other legitimate tax, into the hands of the governing powers, who reckoned on this subsidy as a set-off against the costs of the entertainment. As the tax only

affected the fortunate, no individual felt it as a grievous burden. But even the slight toll on such sums as were constantly changing hands, made up a safe, and, in many cases, a considerable profit.

This useful institution had not been forgotten, when the establishment was "mounted" at the Elms; and from this source flowed that regular revenue spoken of before. On a pedestal of *rosso antico*, near the centre table in the lansquenet room, stood a tall, slender silver vase, curiously carven, ample below, but narrowing towards the neck, somewhat in the shape of a Greek amphora. Here, too, there was no expressed regulation; and no one could remember the slightest hint dropped by La Baronne, or Mariette Clyde. Yet, somehow, each fresh arrival, before he had been half-an-hour under that roof, understood what was expected from him and his fellows. A "pass" of three, at the least, made tribute to the dainty *cagnotte* obligatory; and the *habitués* of the Elms would no more have dreamed of evading it, than of defrauding the Customs, or making false returns to their tax-gatherer.

Now, the sight of that same vase, even during his first visit, exercised Hugh Standish sorely. He was quick-witted enough in some things, and took in the whole position at a glance. In the first place, it was evident that Tempest had rather strained the facts, in affirming that several who frequented M^{de}. de Vintimille's "evenings" never played. One and another would doubtless sit out, or stand watching the game for an hour or two; but Hugh could not avoid noting that, taking that same evening through, he was the solitary total abstainer. If he persisted in this, he argued with himself, he would be simply accepting costly entertainment—for that it was costly, none that used their eyes could doubt—on false pretences, and might soon be looked on as a mere *pique-assiette*. Clearly he ought, from the first, to have paid his footing like the rest.

Of course this was the very childishness of casuistry. If such scruples troubled him, he might easily have dropped his mite into the treasury unobserved, or, better still, have refrained altogether from presenting himself again at the Elms. But of this last alternative Hugh was absolutely incapable.

The place had a fascination for him, such as he had never before known ; for he had never before been brought in contact with the very substance, so to speak, of temptation. Now-a-days it would seem almost incredible, and even at that time the case was very exceptional ; but two brief visits to Paris made up the sum of Standish's Continental travels : so that Baden, Hombourg, and other similar resorts, were only known to him by name. He was, by nature, of the country countryfied, you know ; and his favourite pursuits, when the town season was over, filled up all the summer and autumn. Then Herncourt had always its attractions ; and, furthermore, it may be that, hitherto, some salutary instinct had withheld him from walking wittingly into the jaws of danger.

From the vice of avarice he was utterly free, and any morning would have parted with his winnings of overnight to oblige a comrade, or even acquaintance. Nevertheless, like better and wiser men, he was dazzled and bewildered by the vision of El Dorado. The ring of the gold pieces chimed in his ears like pleasant laughter, and the rustle of the crisp bank-paper was like a soft whisper ; and, truth to say, Mammon was royally represented there. For at those games it is almost necessary that ready money should be staked ; and it was a point of etiquette with those who assembled regularly at the Elms, never to leave the house with a score uncleared.

The sight of so much palpable wealth, incessantly circulating, incessantly changing hands, fairly bewitched Hugh Standish. He was usually the youngest of all sitting round that table ; but, often, as he came forth into the morning light, he would not have seemed so to any passer-by ; and whether he were winning or losing—this last case, to be sure was rare—that same terrible earnestness was always on his face.

It was not long before this peculiarity was marked by several present there ; chiefly it was noticed by Vladimir Koutchikoff. Under the polished ice of the Muscovite's exterior, ran a strong current of the savage Ukraine blood—the blood of the Don Cossack, who, riding in from the fight, rejoicing, ceases not to goad his captives with his lance-point. There was no devilish malignity in the

Prince Vladimir's nature ; that is to say, he did not imprecate evil on people who had never thwarted or offended him ; but—on the principle of the eccentric personage who haunted the track of the lion-tamer—if a disaster was to happen, he wished to assist thereat. In fine, beyond question, any spectacle of human suffering had a certain attraction for him ; and in the gnashing of teeth of men, or the weeping of women, he found a kind of *acerba voluptas*. He had a wonderful sagacity in divining the approach of misfortune ; and it was an ill augury for anyone's success, either in business or play, when Koutchikoff began to watch them narrowly.

Hugh was utterly unconscious of being “studied ;” neither, had he been aware of it, would it then have gravely troubled or annoyed him. But it was very different when one evening—it was about a week after his first visit to the Elms—glancing upwards by chance, he saw Horace Morland entering through the *portières*.

However, the new comer's demeanour was eminently calculated to put Standish at his ease. He nodded familiarly, whilst a smile of extra geniality, not *too* intelligent, overspread his plump smooth face. It was evident that he, at least, thought that there was no likelier or properer place for their meeting than the Elms.

Nevertheless, Hugh felt hugely disconcerted ; and, though he chid himself sharply for such cowardice, the trouble grew on him, till his attention began to wander from the game. He withdrew from it at the first decent opportunity, and sauntered across the room towards the fireplace, where Morland stood chatting with Cecil Malpas, another late arrival. Hugh had intended to let the other fire first, but in his confusion, he drew trigger prematurely.

“You here, Morland ! At first I could hardly believe my eyes.”

“Why not ?” the other inquired composedly. “Has not a sober City bee as good a right as a West-end butterfly, to divert himself after working hours ? The rubber I have just left is quite perfect ; and I am never really hungry except when I sup here. I don't play in this room ; but that's a matter of taste, I should have no scruples about it with Geldschein to keep me in countenance. We don't talk about

it on 'Change, of course ; but the best of this place is, that what is done here is told neither in Gath nor in Askelon."

There was a good deal of meaning in his smile, now ; and under the other's shrewd glance Hugh's colour rose.

"By-the-bye, I wanted to ask you something," he said hurriedly ; and, taking Morland's arm, he drew him aside, whilst Malpas lounged away towards the lansquenet table.

"You say you don't talk of these things on 'Change," Standish went on, slightly averting his face ; "I want you not to talk about them *anywhere*. I'm not the least ashamed of being found here ; but, for more money than will be staked to-night, I would not let Uncle Piers know it. You understand me ?"

If it be more blessed to give than to receive, Hugh Standish, up to this time, had surely been favoured above his fellows. He had been able to do numberless small kindnesses for others ; but he had never yet asked a favour, much less asked grace, at any man's hands. He was by no means puffed up in his own conceit ; yet it may well be that he had taken an unconscious pride in this independence. If so, this was abased now. By those last words—and he knew it right well—he placed himself in Morland's power ; and, though he had no fear of the other's misusing the opportunity, the sense of degradation was always there.

After all, the situation was nearly the same as when he first took Horace into his financial confidence ; and yet there was no weight on his heart when, a few hours later, he turned westwards from Lincoln's Inn. Twice lately, too, he had gone thither on a like errand, without scruple or shame. But, in truth, Hugh had brought himself to look on these transactions as purely business matters, in which delicacy would have been rather out of place : the first step taken, the others followed, of course. Assuredly, that morning in the Albany, he was free from the shadow of a pledge, or even a tacit understanding ; and now he knew that if any lips, besides his own, had told Sybil Coniston how the night was passing with Hugh Standish, she would have smiled in the very scorn of disbelief. Doubtless, if the case were sifted narrowly, it would turn out one of those distinctions without differences, which come in so usefully in life's

comedy But Hugh—at the best of times a poor metaphysician—could by no means appreciate this, and was disconcerted accordingly.

Morland indulged in his own peculiar chuckle—a smooth, unctuous merriment, in which there was no ring.

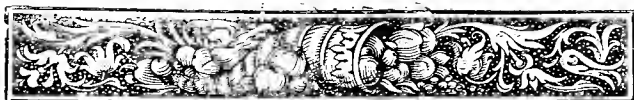
“You needn’t be the least alarmed,” he said; “don’t you see, that to all intents and purposes we are in the same boat, and that I should lose far more than you by turning Queen’s evidence? However, if it will make you any happier, I give you my honour Uncle Piers shall never be made wiser by me. How have they been treating you of late? Not over kindly, I fear—judging by your face as I came in.”

With the momentary sense of relief, Hugh’s elastic spirit rose, and he laughed in his turn, but honestly and outright.

“That was all my cunning. At those games, they say you should always keep your countenance; and looking serious is the easiest way of doing that. I’m a little a-head of them now—for a wonder—and I’ve a fancy for leaving well alone. I’ll go in and take a lesson at whist, and not touch another card to-night.”

And Standish awoke on the morrow with a comfortable sense of having kept, not only his word—but his winnings.





CHAPTER XLVII.

HUGH'S TWO VISITORS.

MR. CONISTON and his late ward, as it chanced, had only one club in common: it was a semi-political one, and rarely resorted to by either. The case is one of perpetual recurrence. Have we not all friends of our youth, whom it is always a joy to meet, from whom it is still a sorrow to part, whom, nevertheless, we see far less frequently than some ordinary acquaintances, with whom perhaps we have not a single feeling in common? Life—town life, at least—moves in grooves quite as much as in circles; and though the rim, dividing each from each, is often almost invisible, the severance is just as effectual as if an iron wall ran between.

Coniston was alone now in Devorgoil Square, for when the girls had once settled down at Herncourt, they were loth to leave it; and it was decided that, this year, the move back to town should be deferred till after Easter.

The arrangement was not so hard on their father as it might seem: for he was never so thoroughly happy as in his country home. Now, he had a fair excuse for running down every Friday, at least; and, if business was not very brisk in the City, the middle of the following week not seldom found him there.

One afternoon, Mr. Coniston, who was clever at such matters, was planning with Alice some alterations for her

aviary, when this young person rather startled her parent by a sudden question, "*Padre*, why don't you tell us something about Hugh?"

Now, the simple fact was that, of his own personal knowledge, Piers could say little or nothing: for he had not set eyes on Alice's champion for a full fortnight. But somehow he felt reluctant—almost ashamed—to avow this, and answered contrary to his wont, rather in Jesuitical fashion; for all his information was at second-hand.

"Because there's hardly anything to tell, my princess. We meet very seldom, of course; for Hugh amuses himself, as he has good right to do, in his own way, and I creep about the West-end so soberly. All my playtime is spent down here. He has moved his horses—the same three that you remember—to Knighton, and hunts from town, and rides brilliantly, when he *does* ride. He can't be so keen about it, though, as he used to be; for sometimes, I hear, he does not come down twice in a week. But your Royal Highness had better catechise him in person. I'll try and bring him down next Friday."

Sybil was not present when these words passed; but you may be sure that Alice—damsels in their transition state are proverbially sharp-sighted in these matters—lost no time in repeating them; and, a little later, Piers Coniston read on his elder darling's face the same signals of happy tremulous expectation that he had seen often enough in the past winter, when a certain quick footfall drew nearer and nearer.

Accordingly, on the morrow, returning from the City, Mr. Coniston called in the Albany, intending to leave a note there. He was infinitely surprised to hear that Standish was at home, and had not been out that day.

Hugh himself opened the door of the inner room. His eyes had a startled, uncertain look, like those of one suddenly roused from sleep—indeed, the familiar voice without had broken a long, semi-conscious reverie—and his hand, usually so firm and cool, felt hot and tremulous. Such signs of a body or mind ill at ease, might have been noticed even by a stranger: you may guess if they escaped Piers Coniston.

"What ails you, Hugh," he said, laying his hand on the

other's shoulder. "Is it possible that you have been ill, and not let one of us know? Your mother has not an idea of this; for I heard from her this morning."

Under that loving gaze and tender pressure Standish shifted and flinched, as heretics in old time may have done under the eye of an inquisitor, or the touch of a sworn tormentor; yet he managed to force a laugh as he freed himself, and pushed forward the most comfortable of his three arm-chairs.

"Make yourself at home, Uncle Piers," he said, "and make yourself happy. If there had been anything really wrong with me, I believe some bird of the air would have carried the news to Chearsley, if not to Herncourt. There's nothing on earth the matter, except a sharp chill which I caught, coming back from Knighton last week. I have taken no notice of it till to-day; but I felt feverish this morning after a bad night, and, as the weather is not tempting, I am shamming invalid."

There was a touch of his old off-hand cheeriness in his manner, about as much like the real thing as nickel is like virgin silver. Coniston—not deceived for an instant, though his misgivings fell far short of the whole truth—shook his head sadly. If he could but have guessed the full sense of two short words in that last sentence! In bitter earnest, the past night had been a "bad one" for Standish.

"Not much shamming about it, Hugh, I'm afraid. The chill must have been sharper than you thought, and ought never to have been neglected; it never answers to take liberties even with such a constitution as yours. Have you had no advice? If not, send for some one at once, only to please me, to say nothing of your mother."

This time Hugh laughed almost naturally.

"I'd do more than that to please you, Uncle Piers, and I won't refuse if you press it; but I assure you the doctor would think I was playing him a practical joke. A small and early dinner with Forster overhead—he's only just getting over his fall, you know—and a long night's rest, will set me all right; otherwise, I'll promise to have a regular 'consultation' here. Surely that will satisfy you."

It did not quite satisfy the other; but he was one of those who feel a delicacy in thrusting their own opinion beyond a

certain point, even on their closest familiars, so he evaded direct reply.

"At any rate, change of air would be the very best thing for you just now. If all goes well meanwhile, will you come down to Herncourt with me on Friday? Alice has quantities of work for you to do, and she says she's sure you've grown *fainéant* lately."

Standish flushed darkly, as he sheathed and unsheathed a Florentine poignard, used as a paper-cutter.

"I should like it of all things; but—I hardly know—I'm engaged at present. I might get off, to be sure; may I keep it open till Thursday?"

"Till Friday morning, if you like. It will be a poor day when you and I stand on ceremony with each other, Hugh; and we'll leave it open at Herncourt, too: they had better be surprised than disappointed there."

"They" meant a good deal, no doubt; but you may note that, up to this instant, neither her father nor lover had uttered Sybil's name.

Just then, a servant brought in a card on a salver. In their earnest talk they had not heard a ring at the outer bell. As Hugh glanced at the name, the doubt and perplexity on his face changed into annoyance, and his teeth pressed his nether lip sharply.

"Ask him to wait in the other room," he said. "Don't go, Uncle Piers; it's a visitor of no sort of consequence."

But Mr. Coniston would not be detained; and, after a few more words of warning and reminder, departed. As he passed out, he glanced involuntarily into the little dining-room, the door of which stood ajar. He caught a glimpse of a hale, elderly man, ruddy of countenance, and cheerful of mien, examining, with great apparent zest, a sketch of Alken's that hung over the mantel.

"Some hunting friend of Hugh's, no doubt," Coniston said to himself. "I hope he'll cheer him up a little."

He was the least suspicious of mortals; nevertheless, as he went his way, he did realise that there had been something strange in his boy's demeanour. Surely, a year ago, if anything had withheld him from visiting Herncourt, he would not have spoken vaguely about being engaged; and why did that look of annoyance deepen on his face, if his

last visitor was only a country squire? Where Coniston trusted, he trusted thoroughly, and he did not even now doubt Hugh; only he felt a little perplexed, and wished that Friday afternoon had come, and that they two were speeding westwards through the Berkshire Downs.

It would have been better, perhaps—better for all concerned, save one—if he could have looked back into the room he had just quitted, and seen in what fashion Hugh Standish was “cheered up” by yonder jovial elder; who was none other than James Marriott—Esquire by virtue of his profession of attorney-at-the-law.

On the following day, when they met in the City, Mr. Coniston mentioned to his partner his visit to the Albany, and his misgivings about Hugh; but the other treated it very lightly.

“Nothing serious can be the matter with him,” he said; “for when I saw him last—I forget when that was, but not three days ago—he did not even allude to it. I’ll look him up as I go West this afternoon; but I’m more likely to find him at the racket-court than in nursing bonds.”

Mr. Morland’s memory was singularly defective; for, when he spoke these words, not thirty hours had elapsed since he watched Hugh Standish pass out into the pale dawn-light, with such a look on his face as a strong swimmer may wear when, having battled with the waves nearly to the uttermost, he feels an ebb-tide dragging him slowly and surely out to sea.





CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE LETTER OF EXCUSE.



YOU may guess that the "engagements" by which Hugh Standish was fettered, were not wholly pleasant ones : he had, indeed, some heavy business on hand just then.

The tide of fortune had run steadily against him of late, without slack or turning ; and, on the other hand, the source from whence he had hitherto drawn liberal supplies, seemed nearly drained. Mr. Marriott, always pleasant, was no longer tractable. Behind that jovial demeanour lay an implacable firmness and astuteness of reasoning, and the contrast was very striking. It was as though some rippling brook, rounding a sudden corner, deepened into a dark pool full of dangerous eddies. And yet he had a frank, plain-dealing way with him, which, if not real, was admirably acted : when he talked of protecting his client's interest, no one would have suspected him of fighting for a man of straw.

However this may have been, on the present occasion money was exceeding "tight" in that quarter ; and, though the lawyer thought it might for this once be forthcoming, a certain delay was inevitable. Whilst the transaction was in abeyance, Hugh could not possibly quit town ; for he had only cleared his last score at the Elms by borrowing a considerable sum of Noel Tempest, who chanced to win largely that night ; and the latter, should any reverse befall him,

would certainly recall the loan, and was little likely to accept excuses. Moreover, the very sense of such an obligation, felt now for the very first time, was utterly intolerable to Standish. Though no one, so far as he knew, except himself and Tempest, had cognisance of the matter, he was conscious of a shrinking from the face of his fellows; the feverish languor that oppressed him was not the sole cause of his keeping his rooms that day. He felt as if he would grudge no earthly sacrifice to be quite free, and his old self again. And yet with this mingled a terrible yearning to return yet once again, for one last desperate venture, to the scene of his disasters.

He saw the library at Herncourt just as he would see it if he went down with Uncle Piers. The dark purple curtains shutting out the twilight; the fire-gleams dancing over Alice's golden hair, and reflected in certain deep brown eyes—the sweetest and softest, Hugh thought still, as he had thought long ago, ever owned by woman. Truly a delicate picture; and, as he looked thereon, his heart melted within him. But it faded only too soon; and in its place rose up another, wrought in harsh rough colours, yet painfully attractive withal. A table overhung by a huge shaded lamp, begirt by a circle of passionate faces, some sullen, some despondent, some wondering; but all turned enviously towards one corner, where a great heap of notes and gold kept ever rising and broadening before one man, whose head was slightly bent as he told the cards, and, when that player looked up once more triumphantly, Hugh Standish saw his wraith. And now his heart was as molten brass within him; for, as it cooled, it hardened. Come good, or come evil, he would prove whether that phantasm was a shadow cast forward by futurity, or only another trick of the tempter's.

In such a frame of mind it is next to certain that, on some pretext or another, Standish would have declined going to Herncourt on that especial Friday. But he was spared shame of evasion, at least; for on the day after his visit to the Albany, Mr. Marriott wrote to say that an advance would be provided, but not before Saturday afternoon. It is almost needless to state that, when the matter was thus settled, Hugh began to consider himself very ill-

used, and sat down to his writing-table with the air of a victim. His note ran thus :—

“DEAR UNCLE PIERS,

“I am too sorry that I cannot make my own peace with Alice this week ; my engagement for Saturday *must* stand. Say a kind word for me down there. If I live, and if you will have me, I will speak for myself next week. I did not trouble the doctors, after all ; and a good gallop to-morrow from Weldon Gorse ought to quite cure me, I fancy. Send me one line, to say that I may go down with you when you next go back.

“Always your affecto.

“HUGH STANDISH.”

As Piers Coniston read those brief lines, he knit his brows. He himself was disappointed, and he knew how it would be at Herncourt when he returned alone ; but he felt something more than chagrin. That trouble and doubt which had oppressed him, when he last set eyes on Hugh Standish, came back again even more forcibly ; and the presentiment of impending evil was not the less heavy because it was so vague. He shook it off at last ; but it needed an effort, and his spirits were some chords below their usual tone when he went City-wards.

Here, too, ill tidings awaited him. It appeared that Mrs. Morland had grown more and more uneasy about her own health of late, and that she wished her son to visit her without further delay.

“I hope and trust there is no immediate danger,” Horace said, “and that it is rather a case of nerves ; but, for that very reason, I cannot possibly refuse. If the poor mother were to begin to fret, I could not answer for the consequences. When she has once seen me, she will be quieter. I won’t be absent an hour longer than is absolutely necessary.”

Coniston’s reply need not be recorded ; it was just what might be expected from the man. He was very urgent that Morland should set out at once, and absolutely extorted from him a promise that he would not think of returning till he was certain that he could be well spared.

"It will do me good to go up to the traces again," he concluded. "I have been getting very slack in harness of late, through trusting so much to you, Horace. You've earned your holiday right well, and I only wish you were taking it quite for your own pleasure."

So it was easily settled.

"If any letters come here for me," Morland observed, just before he said good-bye, "you'll open them, of course. They can only be business ones; no others would come to this address."

By that evening's mail he started for Rome.

They had a quick and straight thing from Weldon Gorse, and Standish held a good place from start to finish: but he did not seem heartily to enjoy the gallop; and, five minutes after the kill, that anxious look had settled down on his face again. Later in the day, when his horse differed from him as to the need of negotiating a certain fence, he was very severe in his chastisement. Several who were out that day, remarked and wondered at this; for, as a rule, Hugh was very merciful to all tame beasts, and ruled them rather by love than fear. He returned to town that same evening; and nothing of moment occurred before the Saturday afternoon, when Mr. Marriott—punctual to his appointment, and not without some grave words of warning—produced the needful supplies.





CHAPTER XLIX.

“BANCO.”

ONCE on a time—so the ancient legend runs—a great battle was set on the frontiers of Broceliande. In the forefront of the lances of Brittany, a knight, more princely of mien and puissant of frame than any of his fellows, sat on his destre like one in a trance; for he never stirred nor spoke when the trumpets of charge sounded. This was Tristram of the Woods, whose hour was upon him, and he was dreaming then of his lost love. Instead of faces angry or grim, he saw the last passionate look of Iseult's eyes; and he heard her witching tones through the splintering of spears. Even so, he rode into the mellay, witting not whither he went, nor whom he smote, and brought thereout—as was no wonder—a wound that would never heal. Now the moral of this, if somewhat far-fetched, is not obscure. Even in this prosaic, modern life, it is not well to enter upon any encounter, of howsoever courteous weapons—haunted. Whether the matter in hand be for good or for evil, wandering thoughts go quite as far as erring judgment in making the end miscarry.

When Standish drove down, alone, to the Elms that Saturday evening, rather before the usual hour of assembly there, he carried with him many elements of ill-success.

His nerves, originally steady enough, had been much shaken of late, and even his temper was not now quite faultless. But, above all, he could not get rid of an uneasy remorseful consciousness of double-dealing, not only with others, but with his inner and truer self. He knew that, after transacting his business with Marriott, nothing would have been easier than to send the amount of his debt to Tempest by a sure hand, and take a late afternoon train for Herncourt, where he could not doubt of his welcome. He might have taken a real night's rest in the dear old room that had become almost his own by prescription; and been waked by the sun streaming through the oriel, flecked by passage through the boughs of the great Lebanon cedar. Of one thing he felt assured, that if things went hard with him to-night, more vivid than the recollection of what had happened would be the recollection of what might have been. Yet he held on his way, with a dogged obstinacy quite foreign to his natural character, whose chief fault was its facility.

However, poor Hugh was thoroughbred to the marrow of his bones, and did not belie the dangerous reputation of his family: the Standishes, people said, had been good losers from time immemorial. When he entered the drawing-room at the Elms, you would not have guessed from his face that he had an anxiety in the world; and when he drew Tempest aside, to put in his hands a bulky roll of notes, "parting" seemed a real pleasure to him. Noel—a keen observer in such matters—noted this admiringly; for he guessed that that same crisp paper represented a good deal more than its current value. A quick suspicion flitted across him that Mariette must have withheld or altered something of the truth: for what he had heard of the Fulmerstone doings was not enough to account for her avowed dislike of one who, whatever might be his failings, was unmistakably a gallant gentleman.

Well as Tempest knew Mariette Clyde, he did not know her thoroughly. He could not understand this woman—gay even to recklessness, and unselfish to the verge of self-abandonment—nourishing a long steady animosity such as is usually attributed to sombre elderhood. It only proves that this man, with all his experiences and close study of

the subject, was but a very little wiser than his fellows. It is the privilege of the romancer to expound, after his own fashion, these shadowy puzzles, which, if set before him in substance, would, beyond doubt, daunt him utterly.

And yet Noel owned to himself that nothing could be better in its way, than Mariette's demeanour towards this her enemy. She greeted Standish cordially, but without any affectation of eagerness; and, without ever alluding to his past ill-luck, kept up a bright flow of talk on all manner of subjects, till other visitors began to drop in. Only, as, from time to time, Hugh's eyes turned hungrily towards the clock, a flash of triumph would shoot across her own; and her upper lip would quiver a little, as though it hardly repressed a smile.

The rooms filled, perhaps, more slowly than usual; but, before midnight, Mdme. de Vintimille's rubber was complete, and, half-an-hour later, lansquenets was in full swing. Nearly the same players were gathered round it as were described awhile ago, and three or four fresh ones—including Standish, of course, and Ormskirke; who had taken his place, after exchanging only a few words in passing with Mrs. Clyde.

It has been shrewdly remarked, that there is no surer sign of moral or physical decadence, than when a man imagines, without any ground or reason, that he is shunned or suspected by his fellows. Hugh sat down, with a fixed idea that every one there present was aware of the cause of his absence from the last two or three sittings, and would estimate his resources accordingly. In all human probability, no one there—excepting the Muscovite, who rather missed his "study," and Tempest, who had certain vested interests at stake—had given the matter a passing thought. But, in certain states of mind, probabilities enter somewhat late into our calculations; and, under the influence of his delusion, Hugh played even more rashly than had been his wont of late, with the added incitement of wounded vanity.

The result may easily be imagined. Certain men, at certain crises, have the luck of Sisera, against whom the stars in their courses fought so pitilessly; for such strange things happen, that it would almost seem as if those painted

scraps of pasteboard were sentient, and making malign mock of their victim with their wild vagaries. The others won and lost by turns, and the luck, on the whole, was fairly even; but a kind of fatality absolutely compelled Hugh to take a wrong turning, wherever the line of chance divided. When supper time came, only two or three small stray notes remained, out of the goodly pile with which he had commenced operations. He bore up bravely, however, and accepted, with a pleasant smile, De Keramour's good-natured condolences, as they went down-stairs together. Prince Vladimir, who had been watching him keenly throughout, felt like a man defrauded of a promised spectacle; comforting himself, nevertheless, with the reflection that, the night being yet young, a "situation" might still ensue.

There was nothing formal about the suppers at the Elms. For the better maintenance of play, the lansquenet party generally came down together; but, as neither La Baronne nor Mrs. Clyde appeared there as hostess, each man got up when it pleased him; and, truth to speak, few cared to linger long over the savoury meats so daintily set forth.

As may be imagined, Hugh was in poor feeding form. A few mouthfuls of aspic, and two or three glasses of a certain delicate claret, for which La Baronne's cellar was famed, sufficed him. Then he rose, and—muttering something to his neighbour about smoking a cigar in the conservatory—left the room unobserved. Half-way up the staircase was a trellised recess, lined with plants, creeping and flowering, and containing a deep low sofa. Casting himself down on this, he fell to pondering.

In very truth, the circumstances were grave, and needed calmer consideration than Hugh, with all the force he could put upon himself—and he did struggle bravely—could muster just then. To tempt fortune again, seriously, with his miserable remnant of a stake, would be but a sorry jest. He was not intimate enough with a single person under that roof, with the exception of Tempest, to become a borrower at their hands; and, if he could have brought himself to resort to Noel again when the old debt was barely cancelled, he felt it would be useless; for, next to himself, the latter was, thus far, the largest loser of the night. So that vision

of himself, floating on the top of the tide of luck, was a fiend's trick, after all. And yet it had seemed so vivid and life-like. If he could only try, just once more, it might even yet be realised. He was looking at his note-case in a dreary, helpless way, as a man, tormented with thirst, might look at the flask from which he has drained the very last drop long ago, when down the deserted staircase came a light step and silken rustle ; and, glancing up with a start, he was aware of Mariette Clyde standing over against him.

"You must have made a light supper," she said ; "but that is not wonderful. I'm glad you went down, though ; for I've noticed that it always changes luck, and yours could scarcely change for the worse."

He shook his head with rather a rueful laugh.

"It will change too late for me, then. I don't mind confessing to you, Mrs. Clyde, that, for to-night, I'm literally bankrupt. It would be absurd to think of landing a good fish with the two or three tiny minnows that are left to me. I haven't quite patience enough to look on : so I think I'll creep away, before the others come up."

"Stay a moment," she said, laying her hand on his sleeve as he rose. "If you really want to try your luck again, I think it might be managed. La Baronne always keeps a few hundreds by her. Shall I ask her to be your banker for a day or two ? She has done as much for others, I know."

A week—only a short week ago—if any one had proposed to Hugh Standish to ask a loan, not only of a comparative stranger, but of a woman, the absurdity of the notion would have moved him rather to mirth than anger. Now, he grasped at the chance eagerly.

"It is much too kind of you," he said, colouring deeply ; "I should never have ventured to ask for myself. If I did not feel so sure that luck would turn ——"

Mariette drew back a little ; and an odd smile flickered round her lip.

"There's no great kindness in it," she said ; "it's quite a business matter. If I did not feel quite sure that it was a safe investment, I should not suggest it to Félicie. I'll go and speak to her at once."

Before the flush of shame had quite faded from Hugh's

cheek, Mrs. Clyde returned, bringing with her a small packet of notes.

"Five hundred is all Félicie could spare," she said ; and, scarcely waiting to be thanked, went quickly down-stairs, and disappeared into the supper-room.

Slowly and doubtfully, like one who walks through thick darkness, Standish found his way back to the lansquenet-room, quite empty now, and sat down there. He had an odd confused feeling in the head, and something like a chord kept beating within his temples ; and he could only just contrive to put on a decent semblance of unconcern, when he heard steps and voices ascending.

Supper, certainly, did alter the luck, after a fashion ; for, instead of keeping a tolerably even balance, it began to shift hither and thither by fits and starts : so that there were soon some heavy winners—notably Tempest and Ormskirke.

This roystering noble was in great force that night. Sitting there, with his broad chest well thrown out, his masterful face slightly wine-flushed, and his fierce eyes gleaming, he looked almost strong enough to put a force upon fortune. But, to do him justice, it was not good liquor, or the gamester's triumph, only, that sent the blood coursing so merrily through those big blue veins. He had been fond of play since his youth ; but he had never studied the changes and chances of the game more carefully, than he had come to study the changes and chances of Mariette Clyde's humour. She was in an unusually gracious mood to-night ; and as she leaned over the high back of his chair, so that he could feel her breath on his cheek, and sometimes the light pressure of her fan on his shoulder, it is no wonder if the Viscount felt, as he himself would have expressed it, "like winning all the way."

It might have tempered his exultation, had he noticed that Mariette's interest in his own game was only feigned, and that her attention was really riveted on that of the man who sat exactly opposite, who was no other than Standish.

Hugh had been playing much more cautiously since supper, but still losing steadily, till at length only one £20

note lay before him : he refrained from playing till it came to his turn to deal, and then pushed this forward as his first stake. He dealt the cards in a heavy, listless way, expecting to see that solitary quickly follow its fellows ; but fortune seemed to have repented of her cruelty, and a "pass" ensued, memorable even at the Elms. Hugh's vision was very nearly realised ; for, at length, a *masse* lay before him that would not only cover his losings, but would leave him no mean winner on the night.

There was a pause. Few, present there, cared to oppose a *reine* beyond a certain point ; and even Ormskirke was not rash enough to prolong the contest, which had already swallowed up his gains. Suddenly—

"*Banco,*" said Prince Koutschikoff.

It was not a harsh or discordant voice—only somewhat cold and shrill, like the winds that blow across the Steppes ; but it grated on Standish's excited nerves horribly. Even sleepers, they say, grow conscious of a gaze riveted on them ; and Hugh, though so intent on his game, had, from time to time, been vaguely aware of the other's scrutiny, and chafed under it. A spirit of antagonism, besides the gamester's madness, was at work within him then, and drowned the last whispers of prudence. After a second's hesitation, he nodded his head to show that he accepted, and went on with the deal. The fifth card settled the question in favour of Koutschikoff.

There arose a murmur of surprise and disappointment ; for the Muscovite was little liked at the Elms, whilst poor Hugh was very popular. More than one pair of eyes followed him compassionately, as he laid the cards softly down, and, pushing the lost *masse* across the table, rose up, speaking never a word. He walked somewhat unsteadily—for that confusion of the brain was vexing him once more—across the room towards the fire-place, and stood there for a minute or so, pressing his handkerchief mechanically to his lip, which had begun to bleed inwardly. There was a sound as of low mocking laughter all round him ; but, when he glanced angrily over his shoulder, he was fain to recognise that it was a distempered fancy ; for the faces round the table were, perhaps, graver than their wont, and Koutschikoff's, especially, might have been of carved stone. Yet,

though the thin cruel lips were not curved, there was a glitter in the cruel blue eyes, as the Muscovite watched his late adversary moving towards the door—always with that same wavering in his gait—and marked those crimson stains on his handkerchief. Those signs were not unfamiliar to this philanthropist, and he felt a complaisant conviction that his “study” had come off after all.

The others, once more busy with their game, hardly noticed his departure; but after the retreating figure Mariette Clyde looked rather wistfully, as it vanished through the doorway. Pursuing her ancient grudge, she had been very willing that Miss Coniston’s lover should be involved in some serious scrape, of which Sybil should eventually be made aware. But, now, just the same misgivings shot across her, as had assailed her when she looked down from Fulmerstone cliffs on the rising water.

Was it possible that, once again, she had helped, unwittingly, to bring on a situation of mortal peril? She tried to laugh herself out of the doubt; but it would haunt her. She drew back noiselessly from the lansquenet table, and passed into the other room. Here, she only lingered long enough to whisper a few words in Mdme. de Vintimille’s ear, and then vanished altogether.

Womanhood would be nothing without its contradictions; and luckily to evil, not less than to good, applies the motto—*Nunquam sibi constans*.





CHAPTER L.

A TERRIBLE TEMPTATION.

NOW he made his way out of the Elms, Hugh Standish never knew. He had a vague impression that some one, who looked on him wonderingly, had helped him to his hat and overcoat ; but it seemed as if this had happened years ago. The clear cold air—the night was hard upon dawn—revived him somewhat ; and he walked on swiftly, and much more steadily eastward. His one fixed idea was to get home ; he would not even try to think, till he was safe within his own doors. The way seemed very long, and the rise in St. George's Place strangely steep ; but the Albany received him at last, and, with a great gasp of relief, Hugh flung himself into his own arm-chair, and lay there panting, likesome hunted thing that has hardly gained sanctuary. He rose after a while, and going into his dressing-room, bathed his face and head : then merely shaking the water off his hair and beard, he sat down again, and began to ponder in earnest.

After all, why was he thus disquieted ? He had had a real bad night, no doubt ; but not a whit worse than had befallen others, less able, perhaps, to sustain the loss. He might be cramped and pinched for awhile, as he well deserved to be ; but it was no question of ruin. His debt to M^{me}. de Vintinille must be paid instantly, of course ; but the wherewithal—the chord within his temples began to

throb more fiercely here, and, only by a great effort, Hugh pulled himself together once more. If Marriott proved impracticable, for what were Jews created, if not for such an emergency? If the money cost him three hundredfold, it should be forthcoming before Monday at noon.

Just then a sharp pang, like an ice-spike, went straight to his heart, and his brow grew damp, like that of one in mortal sickness. On what express condition had Marriott made the first advance? Was it not stipulated that he, Hugh Standish, should not attempt, without due notice given, to seek for aid in any other quarter? And had he not so pledged himself, affirming—with a laugh, too, he could well remember—that the other was quite safe in trusting to his word? The possibility of deliberately breaking such an engagement did not, even at that desperate moment, cross his mind; so this way of escape was cut off utterly. There were men of his acquaintance, doubtless, able, if they should be willing, to help him; but to Hugh, in his simplicity, thus to borrow without visible means of repayment, seemed mere dishonesty. A miserable sense of helplessness possessed and overbore him; he felt, too, somehow, that he was entrapped of malice prepense; though wander as they would, his suspicions found no special mark.

After all, then, that confession, full and free, must be made to Uncle Piers. And what manner of expression would the gentle face, which had never yet looked on him unkindly, wear when Hugh Standish stood there to avow the deception—that was the right word for it—of the last few months, and the motive for which he had stooped to deceive? Even if he could bring himself to forgive, was it not clear as the sun in heaven, that Piers Coniston would rather trust his daughter's happiness to any honest hard-working hind, than to such an one as this? So, whatsoever else might befall, Sybil was utterly lost to him now. And then, could there be much in life worth the winning—much worth living for at all?

It is not well that the thoughts of a man, ever so cool and calm, should travel far in this direction; and, when the brain is well-nigh distraught, the peril is, of course, increased a thousandfold. On a table, almost within arm's-length of Hugh, lay the Florentine poignard—still keen of point

and edge, as the cunning armourer left it. A rifle bullet would not reach the seat of life more swiftly and surely than yonder long thin blade, driven home by a resolute hand. Just one brief pang, perhaps not sharper than he had endured already, and then—rest for body and brain. The temptation well-nigh mastered him; but, before quite yielding to it, he thought he would write “good-bye” to Herculourt and pray them to think of him, there, rather pitifully than hardly.

If his temples would only stop throbbing, for a minute or two, he would try; and he rose up to his feet, striving to steady himself. As he stood thus, his wandering eyes became steady all at once, and were riveted with a strange intentness on one corner of the room—the darkest, because the most remote from the single shaded lamp, now burning low. It was the merest trick of fancy, of course; but it seemed to Hugh, that out of the heart of the darkness, came a soft opaline light, and that this lengthened and broadened, gradually assuming the vague outline of a figure and a face; and that the lines waxed clearer and firmer, till there stood there the very presentment of Sybil Coniston as he had looked upon her last; dressed, not in ghostly white raiment, but in sweeping robes of his own favourite colours—blue and grey. The sweet face was very pale; the deep brown eyes were very sad; and the dainty lips were trembling a little, as he had seen them tremble twice or thrice. But he felt through every pulse of his being that his love loved him still—after all—in spite of all—and was there to save, not to judge him. He flung his arms up with a great cry of joy, like one in death-strait to whom rescue has come by miracle, and tried to spring forward; but he could not stir a limb, and the space betwixt himself and the fair phantasm became, in an instant, a vast abyss, on the hither verge of which he stood swaying to and fro, like a reed shaken by tempest. And, suddenly, out of the awful depths below shot up, with the roar and rush of a hundred Geysers blended, a huge black surge, which wrapped him round, and caught him up, and bore him away—ah! so far away.



CHAPTER LI.

A LETTER AND A MESSENGER.

MR. CONISTON did not, on this occasion, thoroughly enjoy his "play time." He was himself more vexed than he would have cared to allow at Hugh Standish's defection ; and he found that his children took it even more to heart than he had reckoned on. Alice's indignation was eloquent ; and Sybil's face, though it bespoke no anger, was quite as expressive. Coniston made the very best of it, of course, and took special care not to allude to Hugh's bodily indisposition ; but even whilst he talked so carelessly, those same misgivings of evil impending came back again and again ; and he was so unused to dissemble with his children, that he felt this would every moment be apparent. Perhaps, for the first time in his life, it was with rather a sense of relief that he met the up train on Monday morning : and the idea of working double tides, for this week at least, was rather welcome to him. He would have the less time for thinking, at any rate. On reaching town he went straight to his City offices. There, beside the usual business letters, he found one addressed directly to his junior partner. This Coniston put aside, and hesitated for awhile about opening. At last, remembering Morland's express directions, he broke the heavy official-looking seal. The first few lines he glanced over carelessly enough ; but as he proceeded, there

came a kind of terror into his eyes, and, before he had reached the bottom of the first page, his hand had begun to tremble. This was what he read :—

“ 200 Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

“ DEAR SIR,

“ I fear that our slight acquaintance scarcely warrants the course I am taking, and I am also aware that it is scarcely professional ; yet I am inclined to think it the most beneficial one for all parties concerned. I will state the case as briefly as possible.

“ During the last few months one of my clients has, upon my recommendation, made considerable advances to Mr. Hugh Standish on his simple note of hand, and at moderate interest. I could not have so advised my client if, personally, I had not known something of Mr. Standish’s position and prospects, from being well acquainted with the neighbourhood of Chearsley. My information, however, on this subject was general and indefinite ; and the time has arrived when, in justice to my client, before increasing the present liabilities, I am compelled to require more accurate details than Mr. Standish, with the most honourable intentions, can supply.

“ From the very first, Mr. Standish has manifested a great anxiety that these transactions should be kept from the knowledge of his guardians. I need, therefore, scarcely remark that this communication is strictly confidential. But, from your intimate business relations with Mr. Coniston, I think it possible that you may be able—of course without any breach of trust or confidence—to supply me with such *data* as would justify my entertaining any future application from Mr. Standish.

“ It does not enter into our province, to inquire into the disposal of funds that have once passed out of our hands ; but I confess that I am more disposed to be cautious on my client’s behalf, since it came to my certain knowledge that the whole, or nearly the whole, of the large sums advanced to Mr. Standish have been devoted to the payment of heavy losses at play.

“ I repeat that I am conscious of treading on delicate

ground ; and, should you look on this matter in a different light from myself, I have to apologise for thus troubling you, and remain,

“ Very faithfully yours,

“ JAMES MARRIOTT.”

Piers Coniston read the letter through so carefully, that he could have repeated afterwards nearly every syllable by rote. Folding it slowly, he thrust it back into the envelope: then, resting his elbows on the table, he dropped his face into his open palms, and sat there for some minutes stock-still. In very truth, the second great grief of this man's life was upon him; he could only fight it after his own fashion, and the wrestle was very sore. To have learned that Hugh was once more fairly in the grip of temptation, would have been a bitter blow enough; but with the conviction that his boy, whom he had never once doubted or thwarted, had stooped to concealment—had preferred confiding in a knavish attorney to trusting to Uncle Piers—Coniston's heart sank within him. And, if the tidings touched him so, how would Sybil endure to hear them, as hear she must? No wonder that he shivered as he sat there, and that more than one sound like a sob came through his locked fingers.

Yet, when he uncovered his face, it was not angry or scornful; only almost hopeless, and terribly worn and wan. Not from the very first, indeed, had his wrath burned very fiercely against the offender. Many memories of Hugh's dead father pleaded for him then; for no one knew better than Coniston that a Standish, with the accursed fit on him, was no more a responsible being than one of the old demoniacs. Out of this one Piers had hoped and trusted that the devil was fairly cast; but he had only lain dormant for awhile, it seemed, to break forth again more furiously. Nevertheless, with all his proneness to make excuses for Hugh, Coniston did not once blink the fact that the favourite project of his life was ruined. His one day-dream had been—Sybil happy, in her own home, at Chearsley. This was all over, now; and men, you see, after a certain period of life, have not much time to dream new dreams,

So much for the past and the future ; but in the present there was pressing urgency. Had there been no nearer motive for action, his simple duty as a guardian forbade his remaining inert and inactive, with such facts within his knowledge. The fashion in which he had become possessed of them troubled him not a whit ; though, as a rule, he was scrupulous to a fault in such matters. Despite the fair wording of yonder precious epistle, Coniston felt a conviction that his ward had somehow or other been victimised ; and he held it a lucky chance that had put into his hands some clue to the conspiracy. He would have been somewhat startled, had it been then and there revealed to him how very little chance had to do with the whole affair.

Of one thing he felt himself absolutely incapable—the meeting Standish for the present. Whilst he pondered what other step had best be taken promptly, the office-porter came in to say that a messenger from the Albany wished to see Mr. Coniston ; and over the man's shoulder, as he stood in the doorway, peered a white scared face—the face of Hugh's servant.

Coniston was instantly aware that some disaster had occurred, fresher, if not heavier, than any he was yet cognisant of ; and the very urgency of the case brought back the quiet self-possession which rarely deserted him, and had often stood him in good stead.

“Sit down, Harrison,” he said kindly, as soon as the door was shut, and they were alone together ; “and take breath before you speak. You have over-hurried yourself. So—that is better. Now tell me, in as few words as possible, what has happened.”

The other tried to do as he was bidden ; but he could not recover his presence of mind so easily. However, by scraps and starts, he contrived to explain himself.

About dawn on Sunday, it seemed he had been awakened by a strange cry close at hand—not a shriek of pain, but liker a shout of triumph. Startled as he was, and half-dazed with sleep, he felt sure that the sound had come from the sitting-room, and, entering there hastily, he had almost stumbled over the body of his master, who lay prone just within the threshold. The sight thoroughly unnerved

Harrison ; for besides being sincerely attached to Standish, whom he had served since boyhood, he had never seen sore sickness or death. But, with infinite trouble, he contrived to lift the senseless weight on to a couch, and, after loosing the collar, and propping up the head carefully, ran out for help. He was lucky enough to find a night-porter just going off duty, who started off at once in quest of the nearest surgeon. Medical aid was soon at hand ; but, before it arrived, Standish had begun to breathe heavily, and roll restlessly from side to side. They got him to his bed with some difficulty, and, soon after, the symptoms of brain fever developed themselves, which had been increasing ever since in intensity. Telegraphy was then in its childhood, and the means of intercommunication on the Sabbath were more restricted than now-a-days ; so Harrison found it impossible to communicate with either Herncourt or Chearsley, and was forced to act on his own responsibility till the Monday forenoon, when, as he ascertained in Devorgoil Square, Mr. Coniston would surely be found at his office.


A dismal tale enough : yet to Piers it brought some kind of relief ; for, when he first saw the valet's frightened face, a horror shot across him the man brought tidings of one of those black deeds which had from time to time stained the Standish annals. The males of that house, when the skein of their life was desperately tangled, had a way of cutting the knots in deadly quick time. The issue was still in His hands to whom all things are possible, and for this even at that moment, Coniston's heart sent up a thanksgiving.

Now, at least, he doubted no longer what he should do ; and, three minutes later, he was hurrying westwards in the hansom that waited for Harrison at the office-door. Though they spoke but little during the brief journey, Piers found time to cheer that honest fellow's spirits by a few judicious words of praise and encouragement. His own were almost at the lowest ebb ; but he guessed rightly that, for some while to come, those who would help poor Hugh Standish with head or hand, would need to keep their nerves well in tone.



CHAPTER LII.

MARIETTE'S REMORSE.

HEN there is "nothing in the Sunday papers," a small event is a boon to the club gossips. In the course of that afternoon, most men with whom he was acquainted, knew how suddenly Hugh Standish had been stricken down. Tempest heard the news at the "Nomads," and carried it down to the Elms, where, according to his custom, he was going to dine quietly, and, as it were, *en famille*; for even these restless spirits kept their Sabbath after a fashion.

Mdme. de Vintimille's countenance fell as she listened. She felt, doubtless, some womanly compassion for the sufferer; but she was much more troubled by the misgiving, that some cognisant of the circumstances would be very apt, in their own minds, if not in so many words, to connect Standish's prostration with his heavy losses over night; and so her house, where everything hitherto had gone so pleasantly and smoothly, might get an unlucky name. Furthermore, it by no means suited her to remain long out of her money; and the prospect of recapturing her stray "monkey" seemed rather distant and vague. The first source of her disquietude, however, Tempest utterly declined to admit; and he had reason, if not right, on his side. If the recent disaster had occurred under the very roof of the Elms, early in the evening, the game would certainly have been broken up for awhile; but, in all probability, after a decent interval

it would have been resumed. How did Talleyrand bear himself, when his nearest friend, and trustiest partner, fell down at his feet, convulsed, as they sat at whist? From the sight of the other's agony he drew one of his quaint bitter conceits, and, as soon as he was borne away, turned back to the table to finish the rubber—*au mort*. No frequenter of the Elms was quite of the Beneventine type; but Tempest was doubtless right in concluding that the effect of such a catastrophe would not be very deep or lasting. At any rate, his arguments comforted and convinced La Baronne. Her second trouble was speedily swept away by Mariette.

"I am accountable for those notes, Félicie," she said. "I consider that you lent them to me. Now, I won't listen to a word on the subject; you shall be repaid to-morrow as soon as I get back from the City. No—I'm not the least vexed, and I'll kiss you, if you wish it—but it shall be so."

Her voice rang hard, and her brows were heavily bent: both these signs of storm La Baronne had reason to know. So she made a graceful retreat, much relieved in her mind, and did not rejoin the others till dinner was served.

Even whilst he was speaking to Mdme. de Vintimille, Tempest had been watching Mariette narrowly, and he was evidently perplexed. As soon as they were alone, he turned on her sharply.

"Will you condescend to enter into some sort of explanation; I don't mean a full or correct one, but just enough to satisfy any simple credulous creature? For reasons of your own, you've been full against this man from the very first; and, now that he is down, you look as if you'd lost your nearest friend. Mind, I don't blame you for being sorry—I'm sorry for him myself—but the inconsistency is too absurd."

"I don't agree with you," she said, quietly. "I bore Hugh Standish a grudge for the reasons I told you of—*they* were absurd, if you like—and it would have pleased me to see him in a serious scrape; but I bore him no hatred, and I never aimed at his life. You didn't mark the look on his face when he went out of this room last. I did, and I felt sorry, then, he had ever come here. I feel sorrier now. Noel"—she drew closer to him, as if a real danger were

near—"I feel sure it will bring us both bad luck: and it will all have come through me."

He smiled as he caressed her. Flashes of mistrust were in the nature of the man; but he always came back to the conviction that with him, if with no other person living, Mariette Clyde was frank and true.

"We shall have *you* ill next, if you talk such nonsense: how are you more accountable than La Baronne or I? Besides, no one could have foreseen it. From what I've heard of his position, I don't a bit believe his losses turned poor Standish's brain, and it was a mere question of excitement. The same thing was even more likely to happen to old Geldschein, who could lose a million without dropping a wing-feather."

Her face softened into a kind of pensiveness—its rarest, and, perhaps, its best expression.

"You may be right. And yet, does it matter much, if the harm was done here? Noel, I've had an idea, for some time past, that we have been playing somebody else's game besides our own. That must have been a very big wager the Financier won, when Hugh Standish first sat down to lansquenet, if there was a wager at all. I caught a glimpse of his eyes, the other night, when the other was plunging heavily—winning, too, for a wonder. They are placid enough ordinarily, are they not? They were literally flashing then in malice or triumph."

"What a detective it is," Tempest said, admiringly; "I wonder what you *don't* see."

"I don't see whether you are winning or losing, because I dare not look; and watching other people helps to keep one's nerves quiet, I suppose. Well—it struck me that night that the Financier might have some interest in breaking off the Standish-Coniston match. He is the father's partner, you know, and I fancy a sort of cousin. Barring the prior engagement, it would have suited very well. Besides, the girl—one can't help owning it—is as handsome as most for whom

Men have drawn sword and died.

To be sure, they don't draw swords in these days; they only draw daggers, and stab in the dark."

In pure courtesy, Noel just repressed a yawn.

"How clever of you to think of that: I never could build up a single scene of domestic drama. I daresay you're right though; and—*après*?"

Her eyes flashed a little angrily. Those lazy listless ways of his, contrasting so strongly with her own quick impulsiveness, she found, as a rule, rather refreshing; yet there were times when they seemed inopportune.

"*Après*—may mean a good deal in this case," she answered; "though I don't wonder at your not foreseeing it. Hugh Standish, perhaps, has had fewer experiences, and loves in a stupid old-fashioned way. If his marriage should be broken off through what has happened here, and he should ever know it, I shall always believe it was not the brain fever killed him. Noel, I wish—I so wish—you had never brought him down. And that was more than half my fault, I remember; and it all came from such petty spite—a mere graze of vanity added to a little envy. I do deserve to be punished, and I'm quite glad I shall do some penance to-morrow. It's your first family dinner at the Lyons', you know. It will be delicious to sit quietly here, and fancy you looking deep into the Jewish eyes."

She thrust away her footstool impatiently; and her changeful face—almost humble in its contrition awhile ago—looked haughtier than ever.

Tempest's shudder really did not seem affected.

"I wish I might be let off as easily," he said, with a hard laugh. "If I can't be trusted *there*, I ought never to be let out of the slips. Mine won't be fancy work; but rough, very rough, reality. Her eyes? You should see them following the servants about, registering every fault as it occurs. I should think they prefer being cursed fluently by the father. He is a bully in his office, they say; but he never cowed a poor client as he is cowed at home. And the Llama was good enough to allow, that he had heard something of a temper! There goes the dinner-gong. You've taken off the edge of my appetite; but, at any rate, everything here won't taste of fried fish."

From the foregoing, you will infer that Mariette's temporising counsels had prevailed. When the term of grace had expired, Tempest so far "executed" himself as to satisfy

his patron. Indeed, this puissant noble, having once asserted his authority, did not show himself over exacting ; and, when the first step towards its accomplishment had been carried out by Noel's presentation in due form to the severe Judith, Lord Montserrat seemed content that his project should work itself out gradually, without actual limitations of time.





CHAPTER LIII

HUGH'S DELIRIUM.

THERE is a strange country—not so far away: for many men, now living, have returned, after wandering there awhile; though more have strayed onward till they passed its further frontier, which marches with Eternity.

But the after-impressions of most of us who have made that journey are very dim and vague. Whilst we sojourned there, we were hurried hither and thither under a leaden sky, full of a lurid glow, such as never streamed from sun, moon, or star; and our weary feet dragged through soil more arid and desolate than that of Sahara. In that dreary Wonderland were found neither fruit nor flower, nor any rippling brooks, nor quiet waters, unless it were such phantasms as pass through the *mirage* before the eyes of men dying of thirst; and the dwellers therein were not light-footed fays, dainty spirits, or tricky elves, but misshapen goblins and pallid *Lemures*. From time to time we caught glimpses of faces that had once been familiar to us—perhaps very dear: but we saw them as through some dark distorting glass; or, if the features were unchanged, they looked upon us, not with the ancient kindness, but angrily or mockingly. All this we feel, rather than recollect; and, though once and again, in after life, some of those dreadful disjointed memories may start up before us like ghosts, we never could, even if we dared, knit them together.

The confines of this country Hugh Standish had fairly crossed when you saw him last ; and, for days it seemed more than doubtful if he would ever retrace his steps. His healthy constitution did not help him much ; for on such this special malady often seems to take the firmest hold : at any rate, the springs of his life were so thoroughly drained, that when, at last, the restless head lay quiet, and the muttering voice grew mute, the physicians could not deny that there was cause to fear the very worst, and that slumber might well end in lethargy.

He had had every chance that careful tendance could give. On hearing of her son's illness, Mrs. Standish hastened to town ; but the shock of the news and the hurried journey quite shattered her fragile nerves ; and, after one visit to the sick room, the doctors had strictly forbade her re-entering it, save at the last extremity. Piers Coniston, however, was the very man for the occasion. His noiseless ways, quiet self-possession, and gentle firmness, all came into play here, and were of use in their turns. He was forced to be at his City offices for an hour or two daily ; but almost all the rest of his time was spent in the Albany ; and on a camp-bed, set in an outer room, he took such rest as he needed.

Few, who have not had actual experience thereof, can imagine how trying are such vigils. The effort of following the wandering brain through its mazes, and of linking broken words and phrases together, so as not to miss a chance of helping the sufferer, tells heavily, they say, sometimes even on professional tenders of the sick. And how must it be, when great love and compassion draw the watcher towards his charge ?

It may be that Coniston's physical energies would scarcely have borne him through, if each of those dreary days, whilst the malady was at its height, had not brought him one interval of refreshment. Sybil and Alice were both in Devorgoil Square, having been summoned to town by a special messenger on that same Monday afternoon. Piers had a double motive for taking this step. In the first place, he knew how even Alice would fret, at being forced to wait for post or telegraph for news of Hugh in such sore strait ; and as for Sybil—the father's heart failed him utterly here. **But, whatever should be the event, it was best surely that**

they should meet it together. Besides this, he had a selfish inducement, if anything selfish could have part in this man's nature. He was not, as you have heard, without experience in sorrow; and he knew right well what had helped him to lift up his head slowly, after the blow which crushed his life. And now, when another black cloud seemed gathering, he would have his children near him; come the very worst, their presence, he felt, would make him braver and stronger.

And his children repaid him in kind. When, on each of those afternoons, he came home for an hour or so, they seemed to guess that he came for recruitment and repose. They did not meet him with lamentations, or eager inquiries, but let him talk as he would, whilst they petted him, each in her own fashion. Even Alice—curious, as a rule, above the measure of her age and sex—refrained herself, and never sought to inquire if Hugh's sudden illness could in anywise be accounted for.

How it really fared with Sybil, during that sharp season of trial, was never known by her nearest and dearest. Outwardly, she bore herself with wonderful calmness; but, often, she could not keep her lip from trembling; and, often, there came into her eyes, and abode there, that self-same look that they had worn when the hungry sea came on fast, and no help seemed near. The wives and mothers of Sparta, of whose woful hardihood such strange tales are told, must have resorted sometimes, I think, to some secret chamber of the *Gynæconitis*, where

Passions course was free :

else they could never have carried to the end the burden of their days. And the meekest of those grand Dorian dames was made of sterner stuff than sweet Sybil. Assuredly, there were times when her door was shut fast even against Alice; and, as that impulsive damsel never attempted to force the *consigne*, the narrator may well imitate her discretion.

One afternoon Mr. Coniston came to Devorgoil Square much later than usual; and he had not so disciplined his face but that it betrayed him instantly. It was not so much weary as anxious and depressed. He had little enough to tell. There had been no change for the better yet, it seemed,

in Hugh's condition ; but the doctor had hope that such might ensue within the next twelve hours. This was hardly enough to account for the speaker's heaviness of countenance, or for his evident eagerness to get back to the Albany. Beckoning to Alice to remain where she was, Sybil followed her father down-stairs into his library, and closed the door.

"Tell me *all* the truth, dear," she said, coming close up to him, and twining her hands round his arm.

With a tenderness that was almost reverent, Piers Coniston pressed his lips on the poor bowed head ; though his own grief was great, he knew that he stood there in presence of a deeper sorrow.

"I have kept back little or nothing, darling. In some symptoms I believe there is a very faint improvement ; and the doctors feel certain that there will be a change before morning, which will be the turning-point—whether to good or ill, is only known to God."

After a minute's silence, Sybil lifted up her face ; she was trembling so that, but for the support of the arm now wound tightly round her waist, she could scarcely have kept her feet.

"You will let me see him once—just once more !"

The words were quietly uttered ; but the agony of pleading in the wide desolate eyes, might have gone straight to a heart more jealously guarded than the one against which she leaned.

The idea of rejecting the petition never once crossed Coniston's mind. He was not unwise in his generation, and, throughout an honourable, decorous life, had never once, perhaps, set conventionalities at naught ; but such things seemed to him now like the scraps of straw and feather that a strong wind scatters at its will. If to Hugh Standish had been left sense to think, or voice to speak, Piers knew right well what would have been *his* prayer. So the future might look to itself. For the sake of the past—the dear old loving past—those two should have their way.

"You shall come with me now, my own," he said, "if you will promise me to command yourself whilst you are in the sick-room, and to leave it the instant I bid you."

Her eyes were bright and resolute now.

"I will not stay a moment longer than you wish," she

said, quite steadily ; “ and, if you will not let go my hand, dear, I know I can be brave.”

So, within that half-hour, the pair stood in the darkened chamber.

Sybil kept her word nobly ; though her heart sank lower and lower as, through the twilight, she began to discern the havoc that those few days had wrought. There were hollows round the temples, from which the bright crisp hair had all been shorn—hollows round the weary half-closed eyes—hollows in the cheeks, withered and flaccid like those of old age ; and the hand, whose feats of strength and skill she had often admired, the hand that used to swing her to saddle so deftly, lay there nerveless, plucking, now and then, feebly at the coverlet. She looked at all this, and never shrank or trembled ; only tightening her clasp on her father’s fingers.

From the very first, Hugh’s ravings had not been wild or loud ; and, from very weakness, they had sunk now into the faintest murmurs, with long intervals of silence. Whilst they watched him thus, his head began to move restlessly to and fro ; and he muttered to himself a few words, the meaning of which, though they drew closer to listen, they could not gather. At last, the disjointed syllables shaped themselves into a sentence audible and plain.

“The cedar—it would be so cool under the cedar : but—I—shall—never ——”

Then came a dreary sigh. They knew what he was dreaming of—the tall broad evergreen, the pride of Herncourt, on whose topmost branches he used to perch as a boy and under whose trailing boughs he had so often found shade. With that knowledge, to Coniston, at least, came a ray of hope. The poor wandering brain, that had fluttered so long aimlessly hither and thither, like a blinded bird, was near home, at least : besides, it was many hours since any intelligible utterance had passed the dry tense lips. But the weak broken voice, such a contrast to the rich ringing tones familiar to her ear, was too much for Sybil’s firmness ; and her father saw at once that she could not safely remain longer there.

Though she understood, she did not yield to the pressure of his fingers, but drew him forward till they both stood close to the bedside. Then—still holding his hand—she stooped

and laid her lips lightly on the sick man's brow, and for a second or two, let them rest there. When she lifted her head, there was no flush of maidenly shame on her cheek—it was, perhaps, a shade paler—and her eyes met her father's quite calmly, as though she did not fear reproof.

Piers Coniston was then in no mood to chide—indeed, he thoroughly sanctioned that last act of Sybil's: but his attention was, just then, entirely engrossed by the change in Hugh's countenance. The haggard restless look, which it had been pain even to watch, seemed subsiding into a kind of langour, betokening, no doubt, intense weakness, but still savouring of repose. Without losing a second, Coniston drew his daughter back towards the door of the outer room, and summoned the medical attendant who was waiting there. The latter pronounced at once that the change he had looked for had certainly set in, and that the symptoms were more favourable than could have been reasonably anticipated.

Whether Sybil's caress helped to determine the crisis, or whether it was one of those odd coincidences that, though we meet them at every turn, startle us always, those learned in such matters may determine. Wondrous cures have certainly been accomplished by very unprofessional hands, and a simple herb, culled almost at random, has wrought healing where cunning pharmacy has failed. If you once travel *extra artem*, why should there be less virtue in the dew of fresh innocent lips, than in a wrinkled witch-wife's draught?





CHAPTER LIV.

MORLAND'S DEFEAT.

IT so chanced that the pretext of his mother's health was not wholly a vain invention of Morland's, though, had this been lacking, it is certain he would have found some specious excuse for absenting himself just then. As your sagacity has doubtless conjectured, the web which had trapped his unconscious rival was almost wholly of Horace's weaving; and the accommodating lawyer was simply his creature, bound to his service by even stronger ties than those of mutual profit. Luck, good or evil, had singularly little to do with the opportune arrival of Marriott's note; of which, indeed, Morland had left a kind of rough draft before starting.

When this man entered on the track of dishonour, he cast such cumbrances as pity and compunction behind him, once and for all. So, when a few hurried lines from Coniston, written on that Monday forenoon, brought him the intelligence of Hugh's imminent danger, his first emotion, doubtless, was self-gratulation. But, as he began to scan the situation more narrowly, the triumph was dashed with more than one misgiving. He felt somewhat like a miner, who, having accurately laid his train, and timed his slow-match, finds, after the explosion, that the blast has taken a direction other than what he reckoned on, and, whilst the smoke is clearing, doubts as to the result. Some kind of catastrophe,

of course, entered into Morland's scheme ; but scarcely one of this nature. Brain fever is a terrible betrayer of secrets : knowing the other's fastidious sense of honour, he did not much fear what Hugh, in his sober senses, might say ; but it might not be so easy to provide against the babblings of a brain distraught. Coniston's note, too, simply mentioned Hugh's sudden illness, without even hinting at its cause. Furthermore, it was written from the Albany ; so that it was clear that nothing like a rupture had, thus far, ensued betwixt guardian and ward. And yet Morland felt an inner conviction that Marriott's communication had neither miscarried nor been mistimed. All this uncertainty was very irksome to him ; and, for many reasons, it seemed best that he should be on the spot, and that quickly. Therefore—somewhat decisively for so duteous a son—he put aside his mother's querulous remonstrances, and set his face homewards. He reached town only a few hours after the events described above ; and went almost straight to the Albany, reckoning confidently on finding Coniston there.

Indeed, it was Piers himself who opened the outer door to Morland's discreet ring. He showed no surprise at the sight of his partner ; but just murmured " Thank you," as he grasped the other's hand, and, stepping cautiously over the thick matting, freshly laid down in the passage, led the way into the sitting-room. Even by the light of the shaded lamp, the weariness of his face and the sadness of his eyes were plain to discern : nevertheless, the expression of neither was utterly depressed, and his first words crushed a cruel exultation which had thrilled through Morland a minute ago. He had thought that the great hush pervading the place might come from the reverence due to recent death.

" There has been a change within the last few hours," Piers whispered hurriedly, " a change certainly for the better, for the fever, so far as they can judge, has entirely abated ; and he seems now in a natural sleep. But he has never been conscious yet, much less spoken consciously ; and he is so utterly prostrate that the doctors dare not yet give us more than faint hope. It is not safe to talk here, and I cannot stir out of earshot of the sick-room, just now. See—I have written down here two or three things I want done with the least possible delay ; for, though I did not press it, I knew,

if your mother could be left, you would return speedily. Come here as early as you choose to-morrow. I pray I may have good tidings for you, and then we can speak at ease."

Good tidings! Despite his degradation, something like shame tingled through Morland's veins, as—after murmuring a few words of common-place sympathy—he stole softly out. He was very conscious what manner of tidings would seem to him good.

Holding it under the nearest gas-lamp, he broke open the sealed envelope: the contents were Marriott's letter, in its original cover, bearing his own address, and a brief paper of instructions in Coniston's handwriting. The latter wished his partner to ascertain from the lawyer the full amount of Standish's legal liabilities, and also discover, if possible, whether there were any outstanding play debts. But, in executing this last commission, Horace was strictly enjoined to use much delicacy and discretion; so that, whether poor **Hugh** lived or died, no shade of suspicion should rest upon his honour.

With an evil smile on his lip, Morland thought within himself that one part, at least, of his commission would cost little time or trouble. He had spent more than one half hour in Lincoln's Inn Fields, after office hours, within the last few months, not unpleasantly, discussing the Standish schedule with his confederate—gloating over the rapidly increasing total, as a miser gloats over his banking account. At this moment, without referring to certain hieroglyphics in his note-book, he could have stated the amount to a decimal. The rest of the business was nearly as easy. One private interview with Mdme. de Vintimille, or even with Mrs. Clyde, would give him information as full and accurate as he could wish. So, after dining at his club, where he beamed on men and things more unctuously than usual, he drove down to Kensington.

Mdme. de Vintimille was not accessible. Off-nights, such as these, she not unfrequently passed entirely in her own apartments, letting sleep come when it would. Indeed, these intervals of complete rest and relaxation from the strain of calculation and vigil, were perhaps among the secrets of her marvellous conservation. Mrs. Clyde, however, was equal to receiving visitors; though, from the expression of

her face when Morland was announced, it was plain that she neither desired nor expected them.

In truth, Mariette was in a right royal temper just then—royal after the interpretation of the last Tudors. That evening, a little cabinet dinner was in progress at Montserrat House, exceeding select, in point of numbers, at least; for, so far as she could discover, besides Tempest, the only guests were Mr. Lyon and his daughter. Never before had either of the last named pair broken bread under that roof, and it was easy to guess what had now brought them to such honour. Though he had shown himself tolerably patient, if not indifferent, of late, it was clear that the marquis had never forgotten his project, and meant now to judge, with his own merciless eyes, how it was speeding. Mariette was not precisely jealous; for she had managed to obtain both ocular and auricular proof that Noel's sketch of his Jewess was in no wise overdrawn: still, it chafed her inexpressibly, to think of him *au petits soins* in that quarter, and under supervision too. The faces of the whole quartette were, more or less, familiar to her; and she could almost see the bitter smile wrinkling round Montserrat's thin lips, and Lyon's astute visage relaxing into servile complacency, as they both watched and approved. Noel was acting a part, of course,—a part which she herself had almost forced upon him; but just now, she hated herself for her time-serving counsels, and almost hated him for following them. Besides, the farce—if such it was—was very nearly played out, and before the last scene was quite finished, some startling event might possibly change the whole tenor of the piece; as it happened when the poor strollers, at the height of their gambols, were startled by the apparition of the strange mummer, and were aware of the Enemy in the midst of them.

Such being the colour of her musings, it was unlikely that Mrs. Clyde would welcome any ordinary visitor very heartily; and Morland was by no means a favourite with her. Her early training had taught her to answer sharp or bitter words in kind; but unctuousness always rather irritated, than soothed her. She liked Tempest's cool, quiet ways; but they differed from this other's as widely as a still, crisp morning differs from a close murky afternoon. Since recent events had given substance to certain shadowy sus-

pitions of hers, she fancied Morland less than ever ; and, if she could have had her way, she would certainly have sought for some other accommodating financier. Her manner now, of course, betrayed nothing of this : she did not even seem to consider Horace's visit inopportune, and made La Baronne's excuses quite naturally.

"I am afraid you must not reckon on a rubber here to-night," she said ; "for, though Félicie is always glad to see her friends, they rarely muster in any strength, except on her regular evenings."

"I am quite aware of it," the other answered ; "I only came to ask Mdme. de Vintimille two or three simple questions, which I've no doubt you can answer just as well. I need not detain you ten minutes."

Then, taking silence for consent, without further preamble, Morland delivered himself of his errand. Mariette listened with eyes bent downwards ; and, when he had quite finished, she answered still without looking up,

"Yes, I am quite as well able to answer as Félicie. On that last night, Mr. Standish borrowed five hundred pounds from her—or rather from me ; for it was at my suggestion, and I have since repaid her. So far as *we* know—and I believe we know all—this is his solitary debt of honour."

"You are quite sure ? What a relief it will be to his people."

He spoke smoothly ; but a shade of disappointment flitted across his face, and, though it endured scarce a second, a swift upward glance of Mariette's caught it as it fled.

"And what a relief to you, too, of course."

The satiric inflection of her tone would have struck a duller ear than Morland's ; but he did not care to take up the challenge.

"Naturally a great relief," he repeated coolly. "Under the circumstances, how could it be otherwise ?"

"I don't know," she went on in a slow reflective way. "Did not some one—he must have been a heathen—say that from the misfortunes even of near friends we derive a certain pleasure ? Now, you were not a *very* near friend of his, I fancy."

Horace began to feel ill at ease, and, having accomplished

his mission, would fain have made a decent retreat ; but he felt bound to face it out a little longer.

"That may be right sometimes," he said. "But I don't affect cynicisms ; and I am, perhaps, more interested in Hugh Standish than you think for. Besides, putting our business relations apart, I am nearly connected with his guardian. It was at Mr. Coniston's wish I came here to-night."

The tawny eyes flashed scornfully.

"Ah ! you are acting now for 'self and partner'—that's the trade term, isn't it ? Were you acting for the firm, too, when you laid that wager ? Were you acting for the firm when you made that last advance to La Baronne, on certain conditions ? If so, your 'business relations' must be rather peculiar."

If Horace Morland had not been borne through life on a triumphal car, he had, at least, secured to himself a singularly easy and smooth running chariot, and had shown infinite dexterity in avoiding even trivial collisions. Albeit quite capable of a set purpose—as you have seen—and of carrying out the same remorselessly, the surface pliancy and ductility of the man made it hard to quarrel with him : even at school, where he was by no means popular, he was never actually bullied ; and many a time since, his "soft answer" had stood him in good stead. At any rate, with a fair antagonist he had never had a single passage of arms ; and, from very surprise, the bitterness of that last speech disconcerted him far more than if it had issued from masculine lips. Incredible as it may seem, he got fairly flurried ; so much so, indeed, that for a second, not only self-possession, but memory failed him.

"Wager," he said, vaguely ; "I don't ——"

Swift and straight came Mariette's "counter."

"You don't remember the bet ? That is not very wonderful ; but, if you think a little, perhaps you will recollect mentioning such a thing to Noel Tempest. He thought that accounted sufficiently for your 'conditions : ' but I always looked for a deeper motive. I was right, you see."

He was cool enough now—cool enough to discern that denial would avail him nothing here, and that it was better to yield the point than remain longer on such perilous ground.

"I thought Tempest was La Baronne's ally," he said, venomously: "he is still more fortunate, it seems. I must make him my compliments when we meet."

She laughed—so insolently.

"Mind you don't forget it: your memory is rather treacherous at times. I *was* one of the cabinet council that morning, I own; and, if I had voted strongly against a certain motion, I doubt if it would have been carried. For I had a suspicion then—I have almost a certainty now—that the great Geldschein himself might be persuaded to accommodate Félicie on your terms."

He scowled up at her once, and then averted his face.

"And why didn't you stop it?"

"Why did I not? I suppose because I am a woman, and we must have our petty revenges. And—also because I'm a woman, I suppose, I have repented since, and would undo it all if I could. But this is entirely beneath your comprehension, is it not?"

His mask of easy courtesy was quite cast aside; and he looked at her over his shoulder with a sneer eviller than his scowl.

"Your fine feelings do you great honour; but, I suppose, they won't hinder you from taking a cheque, on the spot, for the money you were so liberal with."

"Certainly not," she answered coolly. "Fine feelings are quite out of place in matters of business."

Then there was silence; and the scrape of Morland's pen was distinctly audible, as he began to write on a slip of grey paper that he had drawn from his note-case.

"There's nothing more we need say," he remarked; rising as he spoke, and pushing a cheque across the table that stood betwixt them.

"Very little," Mariette assented; "nothing, indeed, but this. It was part of your scheme, unless I have quite misunderstood it, that the doings here should reach the Conistons' ears. If Hugh Standish lives, I think he will make his own story good: if he dies, your cousin and partner will have *my* version of it all."

Morland's face whitened to the lips; and there was something in it, as he strode a pace forwards, that might have made a weak-minded person glance nervously towards

the bell. But Mariette never flinched, and never abated her taunting smile. In a second or so, Horace himself realised the situation. He saw that bribery and intimidation would be equally wasted here, and that, by prolonging the interview, he would only add ridicule to defeat.

"Do your worst," he said hoarsely, "and see how the Elms will thrive afterwards."

She understood the threat, and was quite conscious of the risk of making this man a bitter enemy; but the daring devil, strong within her then, would not suffer her to retract or retreat.

"The *mouchard's* is not a bad trade when others fail," she said. "Informers here get half the penalty, don't they? You can give your share to a charity, you know, if you have scruples about pocketing it. Well—*au plaisir, beau sire*. If we do not see, perhaps we shall hear of you before long."

With that last taunt ringing in his ears, and such a sense of discomfiture as he had never yet known, Horace Morland crossed the threshold of the Elms for the very last time; and with his opponent remained, certainly, the questionable honours of the day. Of course, there was no sort of reason why an accessory before the fact should have carried things with so high a hand. But, in these cases, Eve's daughters are often endowed with wonderful tact, or wonderful luck. This faculty, perhaps, comes by inheritance: for, when Paradise was lost, though she first sinned, the woman, I doubt not, looked less guilty than her spouse.

But, before she had been many seconds alone, the light of battle had died out of Mariette's face, leaving it much heavier than its wont.

"He may snarl, but he can hardly bite," she murmured half aloud. "But, when Félicie hears of all this, how she will worry herself and me. And Noel, too, will blame; though, perhaps it never would have happened if he had been spending the evening elsewhere. What was it he said, about 'no pauper having a right to a temper?' He was right, no doubt. I suppose neither of us were intended to be poor. Ah me! It is hard up-hill work, and the peak seems further and further away."



CHAPTER LV.

RECOVERY.

IT was not in Horace Morland's nature to allow irritation long to overmaster him ; he was scarcely well clear of the Elms, when he repented himself of his last words, though—in default of any consequences—for her own sake, Mrs. Clyde was unlikely to repeat them. By the time he reached home, he was able to review his position coolly in all its bearings.

He had been conscious from the first of certain weak points in his game. In one quarter he was quite safe. Neither for fear, nor favour, nor profit, would Marriott open his lips in avowal. Where Standish was concerned, the ground, though not so secure, was not precisely dangerous. On that morning in the *Albany*, when he wrote down the lawyer's address, he had not bound Hugh by any pledge of secrecy, deeming it, indeed, impolitic to do so ; nevertheless, he fancied there was some tacit understanding to this effect betwixt them ; and, if Hugh only had the same idea, Morland knew that the other might be trusted through fire and water to keep silence. It was clear, too, that the sick man in his wanderings had let drop nothing of import. So far, the prospect was not unfavourable. But all this was more than counterbalanced by what he had heard that night at the Elms. It was a disappointment, certainly, to find his enemy's embarrassments much lighter than he

reckon on; but this was as nothing compared to the shock of Mariette's Clyde's strange behaviour. For he felt an uncomfortable conviction that she was not one of those who threaten in vain; but would perform all she add promised—and more. So the situation resolved itself thus.

What line Mr. Coniston might eventually take, if his ward survived, was, of course, doubtful. But it was scarce likely that he would entirely sever himself from one whom he had been tending so devotedly; and it would seem as if Hugh's great offence was already half condoned. Therefore, a short hour ago, the sound most grateful to Horace's ears, would have been the news of his rival's decease. But, though his malice was not a whit abated, and he felt no spark of compunction, he did not feel so clear on this point now. If Mrs. Clyde should execute her threat, and Coniston should be brought to listen attentively to her tale, Morland knew right well of whom it might be said that "the last state of that man was worse than the first." To say that his last hope of winning Sybil would be shattered utterly, would faintly express the consequences. He had seen his partner put to the proof in one or two instances, where the limits of mercantile sharp practice had been exceeded; and he knew how little grace was found in that kindly face for anything savouring of trickery or dishonour. If the point was once established that he had shown an interest in Standish's temptation, the fact—or the fiction—of his wager would not avail him a whit, nor withhold Piers Coniston from requiring, in some fashion or other, Hugh's blood at his hands.

Clearly, if it came to the worst, the thing must be carried through with a high hand, by a denial direct, absolute and complete. He had a disagreeable misgiving that it might not be so easy so to carry it through, with Tempest in the background; for he was too good a physiognomist ever to have been duped by the other's pleasant languor. Nevertheless, he had good hope that Noel would be somewhat loth to put himself forward as the confidential agent of the Elms. If it was a mere case of assertion, his word surely, ought to outweigh that of a stranger and adventuress, who would not scruple to concoct

a more plausible story to gratify a grudge. At any rate, it was well he had made such good speed back from Rome : for, whatever danger might exist, he was there to confront it ; and he had sufficient confidence in his own strategy not greatly to fear the result.

Twining and untwining these skeins of thought, he sate late into the night. But it was very characteristic of the man, that, with such a burden on his mind, he should have slept profoundly, almost before his head was settled on the pillow.

It was the custom of the ancient aristocrat, you may remember, not only when in pursuit of pleasure, but before entering on any grave undertaking, to wash and anoint himself with unusual care. This elegant example, Mr. Morland—a well read person, and classic and more than one of his tastes—imitated on the following forenoon, before presenting himself in the Albany. His countenance was not too cheerful for the occasion, and expressed a decorous amount of anxiety as he entered the outer room, where Coniston sat alone at the writing-table. As the door opened softly, Piers looked over his shoulder, and one glance at his face told Horace that it was a living, not a dead rival he had to fear. His first sensation was one almost of relief. Now, at least, there was little reason to dread the terrible *imbroglio* which he had almost shrunk from contemplating over-night. So the heartiness of his congratulations was not wholly feigned, when he had listened to the *bulletin*.

The invalid had, by no means, yet weathered the point of danger ; for his weakness was still excessive. Evidently, though he had scarcely uttered a dozen audible syllables, to sleep, and sleep on, seemed to be his one desire ; and they could scarcely rouse him often enough for necessary nourishment. However, the whole aspect of the case was hopeful—ininitely more so, indeed, than the more sanguine of the two physicians had anticipated, when the first change for the better took place.

“I will walk out with you for half-an-hour,” said Coniston. “I must not be out of call ; but we can talk freely in the court. We are forbidden to speak here above our breath.” So the two went out together.

If any question is to be solved, *ambulando*, perhaps there

are few open-air places, closely encompassed by brick and mortar, fitter for the purpose than the sober arcade which bisects the Albany. After the tradesmen have finished their morning calls, you may pass along it twenty times without encountering more than a couple of your fellow creatures ; and these too intent on their own business to have eyes or ears for their neighbours—there are neither *flâneurs* nor *gobe-mouches* here.

As they paced to and fro, Morland rendered an account of his mission. He had spent some time overnight in fitting it together ; and work turned out of those hands was not likely to show loose or clumsy joinings. Without a halt or stumble, he rehearsed the whole story ; including a visionary interview with Marriott, who had shown himself, on condition of immediate settlement, disposed to make a liberal compromise. As he glanced over the different items of the account, Mr. Coniston's face was very grave ; but he handed the paper back to Morland without a remark, and listened attentively whilst the other went on to tell how, with great difficulty and precaution, he had managed to collect the information which led him to the Elms. When the plausible tale was quite done, Coniston lifted his head, which had been slightly bent till now, and straightened himself up, like one from whose shoulders a cumbrous weight is lifted.

"So we know the very worst," he said. "I thank God it falls far short of my fears. You have managed admirably so far ; and you were thoroughly right in settling that special debt without a moment's delay. Luckily, we can deal with the other matters almost as promptly. Will you see Mr. Marriott on your way back from the city, and arrange for every note of Hugh's being exchanged for my cheques before noon to-morrow ? "

Morland looked at his partner in unfeigned surprise. He was himself, as you know, rather fond of a venture ; but in his wildest speculation, with the chance of fabulous profits, he had never run such a risk as Coniston proposed to incur for pure friendship and compassion. If the balance, wavering betwixt life and death, should incline latterwise, every stiver of that large advance would be as utterly lost to Coniston and his heirs, as if it had been cast into the deep sea.

Piers interpreted the other's look aright, and smiled—perhaps for the first time since he had begun his watch by the sick bed.

If Hugh lives," he said, "the money is as safe as where it is now lying. If it be God's will to take him, he shall die a free man; and I shall grudge the loss no more than would Sybil or Alice. Why, even the money-lender, so far as I can understand, required no life insurance; and I am only a little more rash. No, Horace—I must have my way here; and I trust to you implicitly to carry it out."

You may guess that Morland did not argue the point. The desire uppermost and strongest in his mind, was to conclude the Marriott affair so effectually, that no link, connecting himself with it, should remain. As the negotiation was left entirely in his own hands, this seemed feasible enough. So after a little more necessary business talk, they parted. But just as he was turning away, Coniston's hand was laid lightly on his arm. "Do you remember," he said, "when we first spoke of Hugh's losses at the Chandos, I asked you to let me hear anything that *you* heard? Horace, I should not like to think that you had an inkling, ever so slight, of all this, and kept it back from me. And yet it does seem strange, with your large general acquaintance, that not a whisper should have reached you."

Now Morland had thoroughly prepared himself for some such question, and the lie came glibly out.

"It's not more strange than true; though I frankly own that, with less pains and caution than I used last night, I might have found out much, if not all. But it isn't pleasant to play spy, even with the best of motives; and you would never have suggested it, I know. If we had both been as wise a month ago as we are now, would it have helped much? You recollect what you said, that same day, about the Standish blood?"

"I do remember," Coniston said with a heavy sigh; "and perhaps you are right. Yet," he went on in a lower voice, as if speaking to himself, "he was so near—so very near—coming down with me to Herncourt that Saturday. And then"—the last words of the sentence was inaudible, even to those sharp listening ears, as the speaker turned into the side passage leading to Standish's chambers.

Very slowly, and, as it were, reluctantly, Hugh crept back along the track he had traversed at such headlong speed. Before his brain became quite steady and clear, he was quite conscious of what was passing around him, and his rare words were sensible enough; but the recent past for him evidently did not exist. He asked no question as to the cause or manner of his illness, and seemed to think it quite in the natural course of things that he should be lying there, in a darkened chamber, unable to stir without help. A faint gleam of pleased recognition lighted up his languid eyes, when they first rested on Coniston, but there was no wonderment there; and, when he tried to answer Piers' hand-clasp with his feeble fingers, it was very plain that he was quite unconscious of anything likely to alter their ancient relations.

This mental torpor endured into the third day after the fever abated; but, as strength returned, the brain-mists began to lift. Slowly and painfully, like the pieces of an intricate puzzle, the events of which he was last conscious fitted themselves together till—without any recollection of how he had been actually stricken down—Hugh realised the second causes of the blow. He lay quite still, with eyes fast closed, as, one by one, his memory gathered up the links of the broken chain; and, before he stirred or looked up, he knew, not only what he had done, but what it behoved him to do. And, strange as it may sound, lying helpless there, he felt within him a courage of resolve that he had lacked in the fullness of his health and strength.

"I have something to say to you, Uncle Piers," he began, the next time the two were alone together. "Please shut the door, and see that we are not disturbed."

His voice was firmer than it had yet been, and there was a steady light in his eyes, very unlike the fitful fever-gleams. The other's silence might have seemed ominous; but, as he came back to the bedside, had you perused his face ever so closely, you would have found nothing there but infinite tenderness and pity.

"You must not make a long story of it," he said; "and—you need not. I shall be very much surprised, and just a little disappointed, if you tell me anything, of real im-

portance, that I don't know already. And—Hugh—are you not glad that it should be so?"

With a slow effort—for his limbs were almost nerveless still—Standish lifted his hand till it covered his face; and, after a few seconds, one or two heavy drops stole out betwixt the wasted fingers. He was terribly weak still, you see, and, at such seasons, even stout manhood is apt to belie itself. Perhaps he is to be envied who, looking back through his life, can charge himself with no worse shame than this.

"You know all, and—you—are—here ——"

The last words came out singly, and in so faint a whisper that Coniston scarcely caught them, though he leaned forward to listen.

"You wonder at that?" he answered, his own voice trembling. "My boy, if you cannot trust me wholly, try to understand me better. When your father's son lay hovering between life and death, I fancied few of his friends would have doubted where Piers Coniston would be found. I'm not going to upbraid you, now or ever. If you have done amiss, you have suffered heavily already, and may have—I cannot tell—to suffer more. And don't ask me to forgive you. I did that, days ago, from the bottom of my heart, when I thought you would never live to know it. Now give me your hand, Hugh, and hold mine fast, whilst I tell you what I've done on your behalf. And, when it is all told say, 'Thanks, Uncle Piers,' in the old way. Then, for the present, let things rest."

The calm, persuasive tones were the best restorative; and, very soon, Standish was able to listen to, and comprehend, a succinct statement of the details you wot of, and learned that—ordinary trade debts apart—his sole creditor sat beside him there.

"You must thank Morland, too," Coniston interrupted—Hugh was getting over excited in his gratitude and penitence—"I could have done little without his tact and energy. It was the happiest chance, too, that I had authority to open his letters; and, indeed, that the attorney should have applied to him at all."

"Was that so strange?" Hugh asked languidly. "Marriott might have told me what he meant to do; but, under the

circumstances, wasn't it natural he should write to Morland? Without that reference, they would hardly have dealt with me at all."

The other drew back a little, so that his face was nearly hidden by a curtain. His great command of countenance was utterly failing him then, and he knew it.

"Without that reference?" he said, speaking very low. "I don't quite understand. You mean that you went to Lincoln's Inn Fields on his recommendation?"

Hugh's perceptions were still so far below par, that he was more inclined to accept than to reason on any fact whatever. For instance—though Piers passed lightly over that point—had he been in full possession of his faculties, he would have recognised that, by plain dealing and plain speaking, the junior partner could hardly have accounted for any acquaintanceship with the Elms. Now, however, something—perhaps a slight change in Coniston's voice—made him suspect mystification somewhere. He could not, for the life of him, remember that, when they first talked finance, Morland had insisted on, or even hinted at, secrecy. Nevertheless, he answered with a certain hesitation.

"I fancied—didn't Horace tell you of our conversation here? I thought he behaved so very well and good-naturedly. He would have lent me the money himself, I believe, if he had not thought it would have been a breach of confidence towards you. Without his card as my passport, I should not have fared so well among the Philistines. I really believe that they let me off very easily."

Perhaps, never once, in the course of his genial life, had wrath burned so hotly within Piers Coniston as it did just then. Most other offences he was apt rather to condone than condemn; but for deceit there was found in him no drop of leniency. You have heard already what touched him most keenly when he read Marriott's letter; and, after all, the sin was merely negative here. Hugh Standish had broken no pledge; and, in acting as he had done, had but imitated the thousands of prodigal heirs, who, in forestalling their heritage, *clam patre*, charge themselves with no particle of dishonour. But Piers felt himself in presence here of positive falsehood, if not fraud.

Lack of any probable object made Morland's conduct

seem almost unaccountable. On this point, however, Coniston did not then stop to speculate: the established fact of deception sufficed. Though integrity in business, with him, stood side by side with personal honour, he felt that he would rather have been forced to impute to his partner some grave act of commercial malpractice, than such a thing as this. With all his esteem for the other's judgment and energy, Coniston had never thoroughly liked his clever kinsman, and trusted him implicitly—only in the City; but of such double-dealing he had held him wholly incapable. Something, less like disappointment than a kind of weary disgust, crept over him when he thought how, day by day, this man had sat over against him, with a lie always at his heart, if not on his lips, and had never once dropped his eyes in shame. And—as if the rest were not bad enough—there was now laid on Piers an absolute necessity to dissemble: for he knew that the invalid's strength had been overtaxed already; and that further questioning, or discussion, might be fraught with peril.

“Of course—I ought to have recollected,” he said, controlling his voice with a strong effort; “but night-watching is bad for the memory, and my head is rather hazy still. And now, Hugh, I will not speak or listen to one other word. You must take your draught now; and, when I come from Devorgoil Square, I shall expect to find you sleeping soundly.”

More than once, within the last two days, Mr. Coniston had spoken of his children without any affectation of reserve, and had brought divers kind messages from home. But they were united messages; by Sybil there came no single word. As if by some tacit understanding, her name was never mentioned in the Albany, uncoupled with Alice's; and many days passed, before Hugh Standish wist whose lips, when his sickness was at the worst, had touched his brow, and, perchance—under Divine mercy—had brought healing



CHAPTER LVI.

MORLAND'S EXPOSURE.

T was a very quiet evening in Devorgoil Square ; for Sybil's joy and gratitude were not on the surface, and the depression on her father's face kept Alice's wild spirits in check. Beyond doubt, Mr. Coniston was physically weary, and the reaction from the mental strain of the last few days had set in. But this was not all ; and, though he went early to rest, he lay awake far into the night, considering how he should act on the morrow. Before he fell asleep, his course was clearly snapped out ; and resolves, thus matured, with him were almost irrevocable.

The next morning, he went to the City much earlier than his wont—for he was seldom seen there much before noon—and was alone, for a full hour, in their private room before his partner put in an appearance. Without even glancing at his correspondence, Mr. Coniston had busied himself in comparing certain ledgers, and making certain calculations ; and he was so intent on his work, that he did not lift his head when Morland entered. Had he done so, he would have seen the latter start perceptibly as he crossed the threshold. Horace was not cumbered with the conscience which has made cowards of better men ; but, as he caught sight of the sitting figure, a sickening dread of discovery oppressed him ; and the doubt—if he ever doubted—passed into certainty as their eyes met.

Men who had known Coniston from his boyhood, might have deemed then that they looked upon a strange face. A set, stern look transfigured it like a mask ; and the other's eyes sank cravenly.

"Will you see that the outer door is closed, and lock the inner one," Piers began. "I have much to say to you ; and business, however pressing, must wait till I have said all."

Speaking never a word, the other did as he was bidden, and then, with studied deliberation, occupied his usual arm-chair. As he sat there, with his head buried betwixt his shoulders, his plump frame slightly *ramassé*, and an expression, partly vicious, partly apprehensive, in his pale eyes, he looked not unlike a cornered cat—of the domestic, not the wild species.

"I want to ask you one question," Piers went on ; "and I want no answer beyond a simple Yes or No. Did you, directly or indirectly, countenance or assist Hugh Standish in procuring the money which has just been paid ?"

That straight home-thrust utterly foiled Morland's cunning of fence ; and the last poor pretence of indifference, or unconsciousness, vanished utterly. In the silence that ensued, his hard, thick breathing could be plainly heard ; and his features waxed livid and swollen, as from physical torture. It was a piteous spectacle ; but Coniston's great tender heart, that would melt at the sight of even brute suffering, was then as the nether millstone. For a full minute, a dead pause ensued ; and surely sixty seconds seldom dragged more heavily : then the elder man spoke again.

"I am answered—fully and sufficiently answered. Pray, understand, once for all, that I will accept no explanation, written or spoken, now or ever. It would not need your powers of special pleading, to make out a good case. You might assert, with fair show of reason, that Hugh was virtually out of my tutelage, and at liberty to select you or any other living person as his confidant ; and that his secrets, even if they were thrust on you, you were not bound to betray. Also, as his need was urgent, he might have been forced—lacking your connivance—to obtain the money through a fouler channel, at more ruinous cost.

Suppose all this true—suppose a grosser improbability, that you acted in all innocence and charity—with me that alters nothing. I have always held a simple engagement of honour, or even a clear understanding, such as you accepted when we first spoke of these matters here, quite as binding as any promise, bond, or oath. It seems our ideas differ, and differ too widely for the present state of things to last. You may tell yourself, or you may tell others, if you please, that you have been denied a fair hearing to-day. Be it so. Only recollect that you are not on your trial here ; and, if you were, I could charge you with no direct fraud, and, only one direct falsehood, uttered within the last forty-eight hours. That is enough—more than enough for me. I have thought over this matter almost incessantly, since, by the merest accident, it came to my knowledge yesterday in the Albany ; and this is what I have determined on.”

Though he entered into no trivial details, Coniston's explanation was, necessarily, somewhat long : the sum and substance of it was this. He insisted on an immediate dissolution of partnership, and provided against any objection or remonstrance on the other side, by retiring himself from the firm, and from commerce altogether.

“It is the only fair way,” he concluded, speaking now in the easy, courteous tone in which he was wont to discuss all purely mercantile matters. “The increase, in extent and importance, of our business, during the last few years, is almost entirely due to your judgment and energy ; and, of late, I have been little better than a sleeping partner. It is full time I went out of harness. No one, east or west of the Bar, will be surprised when they read next week's ‘Gazette.’ It need not take longer to sign and seal everything.”

Without going into figures, it may suffice to state that the terms of dissolution, suggested by Coniston, were so generous, that the other, who had, by this time, recovered some self-possession, was, for very shame's sake, constrained to make some show of demur. Piers listened with his grave, urbane smile ; and then, with placid decision, brushed away all the wordy cobwebs.

“I am merely paying my debts,” he said. “For a long time past you have borne far more than your share of work

and responsibility ; and, in the division of profits, *pro rata* ought to be equitably, rather than literally, construed. When you are quite unfettered, you may do greater things yet. And here—in spite of what has passed—I think I can wish you well.”

Because none of Horace’s remarks have been recorded, you are not to conclude that he kept silence all this while. He had spoken, indeed, repeatedly whilst the business matters were being discussed, and much to the point. He had forborne, otherwise than by a few expressive looks and muttered disclaimers, to palliate, or disavow his conduct *in re* Marriott ; partly because he did not choose to waste breath in pleading a desperate cause, avowedly prejudged ; partly because he was conscious that of one or two awkward facts his cousin was still in utter ignorance. If there was much trampling about the dangerous ground, one of those same snakes in the grass might rear its head with deadly effect. The situation was disagreeable enough, as it stood ; but it would not have been much improved had Coniston penetrated yet a little deeper into the mysteries of the Elms, or had the benefit of Mrs. Clyde’s “impressions.” At this juncture, however, he was ready with any number of appropriate platitudes, and expressed both his regrets and thanks rather gracefully.

“Remember,” he concluded, “that I submit—having had no choice in the matter, and without admitting one of your premises. But, when everything is settled according to your desire, on what terms are we to remain ? I have a right to know this now, and here.”

“I have thought that out, too,” the other answered, reflectively ; “and I see no real difficulty. If I have not a license to take mine ease for the rest of my days, the world, perhaps, will give me credit for having earned it. So, in the severance of our business relations, there will seem nothing strange. As to what has passed in this room to-day, you will keep your own counsel, or divulge it as you think fit ; no living soul will ever gain an inkling of it through me, nor will I reply to any questioning. We shall not meet here again ; for, from this hour, all the interest of the house virtually centres in you : the rest is mere lawyer’s work. When we meet elsewhere, let it be in outward amity ;

but, for some time to come, let us not meet oftener than can be avoided."

With the same air of injured submission, Morland bowed his head to intimate that these terms, too, he accepted—always under protest. It may be that this seeming docility rather touched Piers Coniston; or, perhaps, he remembered that the man, from whom he was about to sever himself so absolutely, was of his own kin, though not nearly of his blood—that, within those four walls, they had worked long in unison, and weathered together some rough and perilous times: or, more likely still, he was incapable of nursing against any creature, howsoever guilty or despicable, wrath over-hot or abiding. What would you have? Our frail and fallen nature will, from time to time, produce such lamentable ensamples of weakness; and, for a wonder, their fellows neither reprobate nor condemn them as they deserve.

Certain it is that, during the pause ensuing, Coniston's eyes rested on his companion rather wistfully; and, when he spoke again, his voice had softened.

"Horace"—since the interview began, he had not called the other by his Christian name—"I closed your lips too arbitrarily an hour ago. I say now, as I said then, that excuse or explanation are utterly impossible; the fact remains the same, whatever were your motives. They are to me quite inscrutable. It is hard to believe that you could have looked to any profit in smoothing Hugh's path downward; it is harder yet to believe that you could have acted in malice prepense towards one who could never have injured you in thought, word, or deed, and who, I am sure, never made an enemy; it is hardest of all to believe that you could have betrayed my confidence, unless under strong temptation. Before we part, won't you say one word to help me towards the truth? It might be better for both of us, in after years."

For the first time since the interview began, Morland reared his head fairly and squarely. There was a very odd expression on his face, savouring rather of contempt or derision, than of penitence or humility. And this was the more strange, because hitherto he had always shown towards his cousin more deference than the differences of their

age and station required. Certainly, never before, in the other's presence, had he indulged in the luxury of an overt sneer.

"We are traders of modern Lothbury, not troubadours of ancient Languedoc, I think; and sentimentality is rather misplaced here. Then you seriously believe that all injuries must needs be intentional, and all enemies made knowingly? If you were dying of thirst, and a man, by accident or awkwardness, spilt your last drop of water, would you aid and cherish him ever afterwards? That's a parable: well—I'll try and make it plainer. Hugh Standish stood between me and the chief hope and aim of my life: when there seemed a chance of his being thrust aside, was I likely to thwart it? I did not take the initiative.. If he has told you the truth, he has told you that he came to me for help, and I gave it—in my own fashion. Do you understand me now?"

"I think I do," the other answered, in a very low voice. I was wrong to have pressed you. But, if you are wise, you will not say one other word."

Over Morland's face came yet another change: you would never have thought the pale grey eyes could gleam so furiously, or the sleek visage express such bitter passion.

"We speak as equals now. You *would* have it; and, even if I shock your delicate ears, I shall say out my say. You never avowed her affiancement; and where was the harm, or the insult, in my loving your daughter—never betraying myself by word or look, whilst I bided my time? My hope was very faint, I own; but, whilst one spark remained, I would have scrupled at nothing—shrunk from nothing—to make it stronger."

Bearing all his traitorous dealing in mind, and judging him as he deserved, you would scarcely have despised Horace Morland just then; for, in his terrible earnestness, he did not seem quite ignoble. Once more, in Coniston's breast there welled up more of compassion than he cared to show. There was some shadow of truth, albeit a distorted shadow, in the words he had just hearkened to; and the strength of the temptation, at least, was plain.

"The old luck of the devil's bargains holds," he said, gravely. "Had you sold your soul outright, you would have been no nearer your object; and if poor Hugh—*my* Hugh

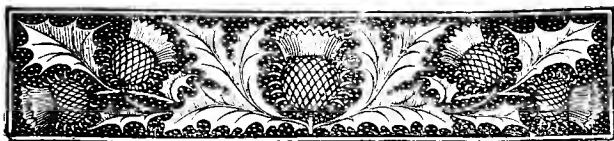
still, thank God, had died years ago, it would have been just the same. I read you very superficially, it seems; yet I read you well enough for this. I am no worse Churchman than my neighbours; but I would rather have seen Sibyl a cloistered nun than wife of yours. And, if she and I could have differed here, I know nothing of my own child. We only make bad worse by this talk, which, but for me, might have been spared. Let us part for the present, and as far as may be, part in peace."

As he ended, Coniston rose from his seat, and, moving round the table, held out his hand. The other, too, stood up, but drew back a pace; and his expression was more fell and malign than when he went out of the presence of Mariette Clyde.

"As we are not in society now," he said, insolently, "we'll drop those forms, if you please. I'll leave you in possession here for the present, and look over the correspondence in Watson's room. Shall I send him to you at once? After being in your confidence for twenty years, he may be trusted with a secret that all the City will know next week. You wish it? I thought so. *Au revoir*, then."

Taking up his hat, with a cool nod, Horace lounged out. So rapidly and completely did his facial nerves recover themselves, that when he entered the chief clerk's room, laden with letters, this worthy person had not a suspicion of anything unusual in the wind, and passed, as he was bidden, into the inner sanctum, in happy ignorance of the news awaiting him there.

From that conference Mr. Watson came forth with a heavy countenance. He was honest, as well as shrewd, and sincerely attached to the house that he had served faithfully in many grades: moreover, he entertained for the junior partner's business capacity a respect verging on awe. Nevertheless, he divined, not only that there would be a material change in the condition of all subordinates here, but that the most honourable, if not the most profitable, days of the old firm were over, when undivided authority passed into the plump white hands of Horace Morland.



CHAPTER LVII.

“MY OWN.”

THE news of Hugh Standish's convalescence was welcome in most places where he was well known ; and not least welcome at the Elms. A real weight was taken off Mariette's mind ; and, doubtless, she was just as well pleased at not being constrained to meddle further in the matter, by executing the resolve which had so perturbed Morland. Her penitence, though it came somewhat late, seemed to have mollified the stern *Sortes*, and averted the omen ; for the ill luck she had dreaded did not ensue.

You have learned already how closely her interests were bound up with Tempest's ; and for many weeks after the events recorded above, a flow of good fortune bore this man onward, almost independently of his volition, with singular strength and steadiness. Others won and lost by turns, and there were no more very sensational evenings at the Elms ; but, night after night, Noel's balance was invariably, sometimes heavily, on the right side. That he played both loyally and liberally, the most fractious loser—few such were found there—was fain to allow. Not seldom, indeed, it seemed as if he wished to fling away a stake, as Polycrates flung away his ring ; and the result was not altered. At last, his gains swelled into a sum, that, put out on the safest security, would have insured a moderate com-

petence to anyone of moderate desires. But the sober charms of the Three per Cents. did not tempt Noel, as you may well believe. And yet he was much too wise to allow a really important sum to lie idle, or profit only his banker.

One night, or rather morning, returning homewards in Baron Geldschein's brougham, he took heart of grace, and craved counsel in the matter of investments. The financial autocrat chanced to be in gracious humour, and had begun, of late, rather to sympathise with Noel's successful daring—to do him justice, though losing chafed him for the moment, he bore no malice afterwards. So he condescended now to listen with half-contemptuous compassion; much as the monarch of Brobdingnag might have listened to Gulliver's tales. More than this—he not only dropped a few syllables of advice, which were literally golden, but consented, for this once, to give practical aid in the way of carrying it out.

"Lunch with me in Golconda Street to-morrow," he growled in his deep German guttural, when he set Tempest down; "and I'll put you into some sort of leading-strings. You're quick enough on your feet, hereaway; but you'll fall and hurt yourself if you try to walk, out yonder, alone."

Money, put out to usage under such auspices, was likely to multiply exceedingly; and, before long, Tempest was aware of an entirely novel sensation—the anxieties of the capitalist. The ludicrous inconsistency of this with all his antecedents, did not escape his sense of humour; and it seemed to strike Mariette still more forcibly. She used to laugh outright, as she watched Noel studying City articles, and the prices of stocks, with a keener interest than he had ever devoted to the state of the odds. Her mirth, however, was not scornful, or cynical; but rather the overflow of much happiness. Beyond question, the brightest period in each of those two lives, into which had entered many strong contrasts of light and shade, was that early summer. Nevertheless, neither the mere heaping up of riches, nor the power of gratifying even a costly caprice, accounted for their contentment.

I read, lately, a very graphic description of diamond-mining in the Brazils, under the old slave *régime*. The

writer dwells especially on the zeal and patience of the labourers, so different from the listless apathy almost universal amongst those who toil in the house of bondage. But wonderment ceased, when it was explained to him that complete manumission, besides a trifling gift in money, rewarded each finder of a gem exceeding a certain value.

Freedom—freedom of word and action—freedom to roam and rove whither they would—was the end towards which these two had been struggling for months past; and it was but natural that they should exult when the goal loomed large and near. Perhaps it was not a very noble aspiration; but men have triumphed less in the realisation of vast ambitious dreams, than did Noel Tempest in the thought that, even now, if it pleased him, he might defy the tyrant of Montserrat House, and bid him keep his bounties for needier clients.

This puissant noble could order most things according to his will. But one thing, even had he cared for it, he could not command; and this was—fealty. The money that he scattered broadcast was always flung down like alms. Even in his gifts there was little graciousness; for men callous to shame, and women proof against blushes, had, ere this, cursed him in their hearts, as they stooped to pick up his gold.

So, despite his fair speaking, Noel's gratitude towards his patron was of the faintest: he suspected, vaguely, that he had really received little more than his due; and, even if this were otherwise, he had, he thought, fairly worked out his hire. Very often, about this time, he used to rehearse, with great inner satisfaction, a possible, or probable scene, and picture to himself the aspect of the hard wicked face, and the wrath of the cold, cruel eyes, when certain words should reach the august ears, that had seldom listened to taunt, contradiction, or upbraiding.

And Mariette—she, too, you may be sure, had her own pleasant phantasms. Tempest had not, it is true, actually demanded the austere Judith's ponderous hand; or, indeed, prosecuted his suit otherwise than by implication; nevertheless, there was a clear understanding on the matter, and it would assuredly be brought to a crisis so soon as the great marquis's patience should tire. At any rate, any

visible slackness or neglect on Noel's part was certain to elicit from the sharp attorney—even if he were acting independently—some allusion to "intentions." And Mariette could fancy so well the arching of Noel's brows, whilst, in his languid way, he regretted the evident misunderstanding, and disclaimed the presumption of ever having aspired to such an alliance. She could fancy the irate father, alternately bullying and cringing, and finally hurrying off, all in a fret and fume, to make plaint to his patron and employer. Best of all, she could fancy the daughter, in her bitter rage and shame—dumb, unless her face much belied her, but looking murder out of her stony black eyes, and venting her spite on the luckless household, much after the fashion of the unjust steward spoken of in the parable.

They did not speak much of these things to each other, these two; neither did they triumph overmuch openly. Yet even a careless observer, watching them together, would never have been deceived. In the most natural way possible, as if they had no special interest in the subject, they often found themselves comparing the merits and demerits of divers places of Continental sojourn. Here Mariette's varied experiences came strongly into play. Also, she was very great on the point of balancing—quite theoretically, of course—income with expenditure; for Noel's calculations much resembled the design of the amateur architect, in whose mansion a staircase was entirely omitted. One thing, however, was notable. Though, as a rule, they made no stranger of her, they never fell into this vein of talk in *Mdme. de Vintimille's* presence. Whence it may be inferred that, in their visionary future, the fascinating *Provençale* had little share.

A wet, cold spring gave place to a still, cloudless summer; and, somewhat earlier than their wont, the thoughts of many, even of inveterate town-folk, began to turn country-wards, or seawards.

One sultry afternoon, *Tempest*, strolling down to the Elms, found *Mrs. Clyde* sitting alone in the shadiest nook of the old-fashioned garden. She had what Noel was wont to call "her consultation face" on; so he broke ground almost immediately with a direct question.

"Well, are your news very tremendous?"

"Quite the reverse," she answered; "indeed, they might be the pleasantest news if—it's a large If, I own—you would only be quite reasonable."

Smiling a little, he beckoned to her to go on speaking, and listened, at any rate, with exemplary patience to the following programme.

Lord Ormskirke, it appeared, had ridden down to the Elms, that morning, purposely to entreat its two fair inmates to honour him with their presence on board his new yacht, the *Procne*, for a fortnight's cruise. The route he left to their own discretion; only they were to be off Newburn in time for the Redwood races—the course being only a short drive from the harbour.

To Mariette the proposal was peculiarly attractive; for she had not only an honest liking for the sea, in almost all its humours, but she cherished, as you may conceive, agreeable reminiscences of that same race-meeting; and the thought struck her, what a pleasant coincidence it would be if, on that same spot, the circle of her good luck was made complete. Mdme. de Vintimille, rather misdoubting her own sailorship, was not quite so enthusiastic. Nevertheless the arrangements suited her admirably. For many reasons she wished to bring her "evenings" to a close, and much preferred making a graceful exit of her own accord, to seeing her circle gradually thinned. Besides, casting wary eyes into the future, she was especially anxious to conciliate the "wild viscount;" for he was a kind of bell-wether in his own set; and it was just from this set that La Baronne hoped to recruit and strengthen her *clientelle*. Therefore she gave ready credit to Ormskirke's assurances that it should be a lady's cruise throughout, and that, with an unsteady glass, the *Procne* should never leave quiet anchorage. When he had listened to the end, Tempest was smiling still, but not quite so pleasantly.

"It sounds well, doesn't it?" he said. "What a pity that, like many other charming plans, it should be so impracticable. You ask me to be reasonable—why you'd startle the Apostle of Reason himself, and I fancy he had not many prejudices. Look here, *ma mie*. I haven't shown temper in this matter since we discussed it last; and I've watched quietly some very pretty by-play, simply

because I know that you're honest, after your own fashion, and can take better care of yourself than nine out of ten prudes. But one must draw the line somewhere. I might trust you to hold your own against the "devil and the deep sea." But I don't choose that your name should be bandied about Redwood race-course, like a tennis-ball."

She drooped her eyelids in feigned submission, to veil the saucy mirth lurking beneath them.

"We must give it up, then, I suppose. And I thought it would have been so pleasant for you too."

Tempest could not repress a slight start.

"For me, too? Do you mean to say my name appeared in the play-bill?"

Mariette had certainly some capabilities for the stage, and with practice and study might have made a fair light comedy actress. Her look of innocent surprise, now, was worthy of a veteran *ingénue*.

"Of course it did? how can you ask such a question? It was so easily managed. Lord Ormskirke told Félicie to invite her own cavalier, and, when she hesitated, or seemed to hesitate, he himself suggested you. Everybody assigns you to her, you know. Poor Félicie!"

Her low laugh of triumph was good to hear. But her companion's brow grew cloudier.

"One needn't stand on much delicacy with Ormskirke, I suppose," he muttered. "But I don't like taking bread and salt on false pretences. Well, all this won't last much longer; that's some comfort. Just one finishing stroke of luck at Redwood, and we'll drop our masks for good and all—my own."

Terms of endearment from Noel Tempest's lips were exceeding rare; and those two last syllables came forth very slowly and tenderly. Mariette shivered a little from very happiness, as she nestled closer to his side, secure under the shadow of the limes. But she went on speaking quietly enough, as if following out a thread of argument.

"It's only fair to Félicie, too, that we should help her now all we can; and I know she is most anxious to keep in the great Alured's good graces. She will need all her allies, if ——"

As she looked up into his face, meaningly, the soft bright

colour mounted in her own ; and Tempest, who had watched those features, till he could have drawn every line from memory, was aware, then, of a beauty utterly strange to him.

Of course, there was an end of discussion, for the nonce. And, before the night was over, Lord Ormskirke—his fierce eyes gleaming exultantly—read and re-read a very gracious note of acceptance from the Elms.





CHAPTER LVIII.

NAUTICAL.

F on other æsthetic questions he was no great authority, Lord Ormskirke's judgment in all things appertaining to sport was unimpeachable; and, if he erred, it was ever on the side of simplicity. Looking at him, it was hard to believe this; for, physically and morally, he quite fulfilled our ideal of those roystering gallants at whom quiet burghers used to stare aghast, as they ruffled through the streets of some seaport, brave in velvet, gold, and gems—the spoils of the Spanish Main.

Now, a yacht, fitted entirely after his own devices, is no mean test of her owner's tastes; and the *Procne* was simply perfection, in her way. She was not one of the severe racing craft, which proffer to the stranger about as much comfort as can be found in a four-pound saddle. Still less, was she one of those floating *boudoirs* in which certain Sybarites affront the dangers of the Solent. In the main cabin, the eye lighted on sober colours—on polished woods, admirably blended in shade and grain—but on not a scrap of gaud or gilding. Such things, in such a place, would have been little less of an abomination, in Ormskirke's sight, than gorgeous housings in a hunting field.

All the other appointments and economy of the *Procne*,

were to match. Even when he was in money-straits—not a very rare case—the Viscount was ever lavish of his hospitality. And now the landing of one of the large Spring handicaps had left him with a goodly balance at his bankers, even after purchase of the *Progne*. Therefore, as may be surmised, his guests were treated royally. But though the meats were so daintily cooked and served, that the “shyest” feeder might have fallen to with a will, the daily *menu* was of the simplest; and, perhaps, only an expert would have guessed at what exceeding cost the few rare wines had been provided.

Under the circumstances, the cruise was almost bound to be a successful one; but it was even more so than, perhaps, any one of the party had anticipated.

The skies were blue, the winds fair, and the water smooth enough to satisfy even M^{de}. de Vintimille; and, when she had learnt to pace an even deck with tolerable steadiness, the plump Provençale plucked up courage mightily, and gave herself the airs of an “old salt”: only, her travesties of certain nautical terms might have made a boatswain blush; and, to the very last, she was incapable of distinguishing jib from foresail.

Noel Tempest, before he had been two nights on board, congratulated himself that he had not allowed his scruples to balk him of a real pleasure. Though, thus far, late hours and divers excitements had made little inroads on his health, beyond doubt, the night campaigns of the last few months had begun to tell; and, more than once, waking in the late forenoon, he had felt jaded and “stale.” The complete repose and change of scene and associations, refreshed him wonderfully. When the party were all together, he took his fair share of the talk; but, during the day at least, what he evidently liked best was to couch apart on cushions, piled in a shady corner, smoking in a slow Eastern fashion, and weaving webs of day-dreams. As you know, an utterly new phase of life was just opening before him; and he felt somewhat like a traveller who, from the crest of a hill range, looks down for the first time on a champaign passing broad and fair.

As for Mariette, it is not too much to say, that she revelled in the freedom of air and water. Her peculiar organisa-

tion exactly fitted her for such a life ; and, as it happened, she had never had more than tantalising glimpses of it till now. The one flaw in her contentment was the need of wariness, if not constraint, in her bearing towards Noel : their confidential moments were few and brief. They had both, however, reckoned on, and accepted this position beforehand ; and, as their vizards were so soon to be laid aside, it was not worth while to let them slip awry.

What made everything easier, was Ormskirke's own behaviour. Though they had been sadly warped and thwarted by evil living and evil company, certain knightly instincts and impulses abode with him still. To use a vulgarism—the viscount “could be a gentleman when he chose” ; and, on the present occasion, he gave fair proof of this. Without actual rudeness or ill breeding, he might, to a certain extent, have engrossed Mrs. Clyde's converse and society. But the mere knowledge that he held her at advantage, made him forbearing. If *tête-à-têtes* came naturally or accidentally, it was well ; but he never sought to contrive or force them : La Baronne had her full share of his jovial, off-hand courtesies ; and his manner towards Mariette was, perhaps, a trifle more deferential than it had usually been at the Elms. For, though he had never ventured, after one sharp check, on familiarity of speech or gesture, words had not seldom escaped him, when stung by jealousy, or otherwise provoked, somewhat too harsh and rough for dainty ears.

That—as he himself had once owned—he had no earthly right to be jealous, in no wise affected the question ; and it may seem passing strange, that his wandering fancies should never once have pointed at the right mark. Yet it was not so strange, after all. Mdme. de Vintimille herself—knowing much, and guessing more—could not have spoken with absolute certainty as to the real relations subsisting between Mariette and Noel ; and on their demeanour in any other presence, no scandal-monger could have founded a suspicion. For the present, however, Ormskirke was on his very best behaviour ; and, to all outward appearance, the sea over which they were gliding, was not serener than his temper ; to be sure, the treacherousness of the Channel's humours is proverbial ; and, here also, the parallel would hold good.

After flitting to and fro amongst the Islands, the *Progne*

put into St. Malo ; and thence, dropped down the Breton coast in a leisurely fashion ; looking in at one or two of the quaint little seaports, where there was safe anchorage, and carrying with her breezes only just strong enough to test her sailing powers. There was not an appearance of unsettled weather till she was safe in Brest harbour ; and there remembering his promises to Mdme. de Vintimille—Ormskirke left the yacht, whilst he and his party took a brief “cruise on wheels” through lower Brittany. Returning to Brest they found the wind fresh but fair ; and slanting boldly across the Channel, the *Procne* fetched Newburn well within her time.





CHAPTER LIX.

AN ABRUPT QUESTION.

ALBEIT anything but methodical in his ways, Lord Ormskirke had a pretty knack of arranging matters pertaining no less to bower than stall. When the *Procne* anchored off Newburn, his drag-team of four slashing roans were munching their provender in the stables of the Red Lion; and the best rooms in that then unpretending hotel waited his pleasure. This last precaution he had taken entirely for his guests' sake; for he himself was no Solent-sailor, and, when once abroad, taking the rough with the smooth, invariably stuck to the ship. But the little port was fitted chiefly for fishing and coasting craft; and, though there was good holding ground in the bay outside, and, as a rule, quiet anchorage, certain slants of the wind brought in a heavy ground-swell, if not a "poppling" sea.

On the night of their arrival, however, the weather seemed so calm and settled, that only Mdme. de Vintimille availed herself of the shore accommodation. The good lady had really enjoyed her cruise; but it seemed to her rather a tempting of Providence to entrust her comely person to a berth, with a steady four poster at her command. So, after a late dinner on board, the gig, steered by Tempest, took La Baronne and her maid ashore.

Noel had volunteered for this service, desiring to return

some payment in kind for his host's courtesy. He had come, of late, thoroughly to trust Mariette; and, if a brief *tête-à-tête* with her would gratify Ormskirke, he thought the other had fairly earned such innocent entertainment.

Leaning over the taffrail, the pair left on board watched the boat as it passed out of the moonlight into the shadow of the shore; and the dash of the oars had grown faint before either spoke.

Quoth Ormskirke at last—

"It has all come off right for once, hasn't it? I hope you're as sorry as I am that it's over. And now for Redwood. I've a sort of notion that we shall have a real good week: I never went to a meeting in better heart."

Mrs. Clyde did not answer immediately; and a quaint smile hovered on her lip, as she dallied with a bunch of charms pendant from her *châtelaine*.

"I think I am sorrier than you are," she said at last; "for such pleasant fortnights are rarer in my life than in yours, and you can repeat them when you will. But I, too, am very sanguine about Redwood. Shall I—yes, you have quite deserved it—I *will* tell you why."

Then, after her own fashion, Mariette made her confession, the details of which are known already to you who have read the opening chapters of a tale now nearly told.

With Ormskirke's wonderment, as he listened, mingled, sooth to speak, not a little admiration. Many men, not over delicate or sensitive, would have been startled, if not revolted, by Mariette's frank avowal; but the Locksley tactics were after the viscount's own heart; and with the contrivers and executants thereof—especially as they had in no wise thwarted his private ends—he could thoroughly sympathise. That the story was no fiction he was well assured; for, like a lightning flash, came back the memory of an upward glance from tawny eyes, shaded then by dusky elf-locks, which had half startled him on Baron Down. No need to tell Ormskirke that those same eyes gleamed before him now, with no constraint on their mirth.

"Do you grudge your 'broad piece'?" Mariette ended. "Though I should be rather sorry to part with it, you can have it back if you will. *Eccolo!*"

Amongst the trinkets and charms a plain gold coin was discernible, as she held them up against the moonlight. The veriest ascetic must have owned that she looked marvelously tempting, as she stood there with her shapely arm slightly curved, her lithesome figure firmly poised, her scarlet lips smiling saucily. And he who stood then close—very close—to her side was no ascetic ; but one who, from boyhood upwards, had worked out his own wild will, careless of evil report, and reckless of results. Nevertheless, something, a little nobler and deeper than mere desire, gleamed then out of those fierce passionate eyes.

Beyond doubt, Mariette's influence, which had proved harmful to not a few, had, in this case, wrought for good. As is not uncommon with men of his masterful temper, he had admired, from the first, her dauntless self-reliance. As their intimacy grew more familiar, instead of chafing at the inferiority, it pleased him to realise that hers was, in truth, the stronger mind and stronger will, and that one woman at least neither his love nor his anger could make afraid. Her careless, defiant ways—her frank off-hand manner—her transient fits of haughtiness—each and all of these had for him a several attraction : and no statuesque beauty had ever seemed to him so fair as the gay mutinous face. Within the past fortnight, as was no wonder, these influences had waxed within him ; and it is more than likely that his purpose was already set, and that, sooner or later—time and place serving as now—he would have spoken much to the same effect.

"Do I grudge it ? " Ormskirke said, in a whisper. "You might take more than that, without my grudging. Take more ! By —— you might take all. You remember what I said to you a little while ago. I'll put it now in another fashion : if you don't like it better, it can't affront you, at any rate. Will you marry me ? "

In Mariette's start of surprise there was no stage play : in truth, though she was not easily taken aback, the abrupt question staggered her like a blow. Her first sensation was a flush of feminine pride ; for an unlikelier subject for matrimony, amongst those bound by no vows of celibacy, than Alured of Ormskirke, could scarcely be found ; and to have brought him into wooing humour, was no mean triumph.

But the next instant came a doubt and a suspicion, and she frowned.

"You cannot possibly be in earnest ; and I never could see the wit of such jests."

In his turn, he knit his brows more heavily.

"Not in earnest ? Look me fairly in the face, and repeat that, if you can. And mark this, too. No woman has yet heard—no other woman will ever hear—those four words spoken by me."

She bent her head to show that she believed, and did not raise it again quickly.

"I did you wrong," she said. "Forgive me that now ; and forgive me—when you can—for ever having suffered things to come to this pass. I am not worthy of the honour you offer me ; but not base enough to take you at your word."

"I am the best judge of that," he answered. "Though I've used it rather roughly, I care too much for the old name, still, to give it to the first-comer's keeping. But I could trust *you*, I think—or thought. What do you mean by 'not worthy.' Is there a black secret, then, in your past, after all ?"

She shook her head gravely.

"My past would have looked better if it had held more secrets. I mean just this. I don't think I'm worse than my neighbours : perhaps, in act, or deed, I'm as innocent as most. But there's not a great town in Europe where a score of men, at least, have not a right to speak of, and to speak to, Mariette Clyde, *en camarade*. Would you brook that for one instant ? I know you better. No. A coronet would never fit my forehead now. I don't know how it might have been, if my lines had fallen in other places. But I never had a chance—a fair chance—even as a little child."

The sad cadence of those last words checked Ormskirke's rising anger. He had, assuredly, not reckoned on a repulse ; but he was not minded so to resign his purpose, and waxed only more earnest in his pleading, professing himself ready to run all risks, and to accept all consequences, patiently and forbearingly. Mariette let him speak on. That she listened with a kind of pleasure cannot be denied : truly,

more perfect women than she are not insensible to the rendering of such tribute, even though it must needs be put aside. But she was quite immovable.

"I have always liked you well, in a way," she said, at last; "and I like you now better than ever; because you are honester, and braver, than I thought for. But I don't like you—I never could like you—well enough to live my life out with you. I outgrew girlish fancies very soon; and, if I know nothing else now, I know my own mind thoroughly. Don't quarrel with me for plain speaking; indeed, don't quarrel at all. It would be a dark ending to the brightest fortnight I can remember."

Though he put strong constraint upon himself, Ormskirke's brow was very stormy.

"Why don't you speak out a little more plainly," he said, "and own that some one stands betwixt us? You need not speak his name. I'll find that out for myself some day."

Now, within the last few minutes, the doubt had more than once flitted across Mariette's mind, whether it might not be safest and wisest, after all, to confide in her companion without reserve. With all his faults of temper, he was incapable of petty malice, or of causeless resentments. Certain momentous words were rising to her lips, when the passing away of a cloud let the moonbeams fall fair on Ormskirke's face. Mariette's half-formed purpose was crushed instantly. She felt that, in his present mood, and under present circumstances, it would be safer to trust a madman with a sharp sword than Viscount Alured with the whole truth. She had not often shown more intrepidity, than when she answered him with a light laugh, looking steadily into his eyes the while.

"That suspicion is *de rigueur*; but, if you had consulted your recollections of the last six months, you might have spared it. Nevertheless, take this for your comfort. No living man, asking the question that you have asked to-night, would have got another answer. This is true, I swear."

So it was, after a fashion. But, in this state of high civilisation, *nuda veritas* dons so many dresses, that it is no wonder if some of them seem like disguises. During the

few seconds of silence ensuing, Ormskirke quite recovered outward composure. He was proud as Lucifer, in his own way ; and he felt that, in his last outbreak, there was something puerile.

"It's been a mistake right through," he said, sullenly ; "my mistake, of course—women never make such. If you keep a diary, tear to-day's leaf out, that's all ; and we'll go on 'playing at friendship,' if you please."

Frankly and promptly Mariette put out her hand ; when she drew it back again, it was tingling to the wrist. The fierce, involuntary gripe was a farewell, in more senses than one ; and, muttering some kind of excuse for absenting himself, Ormskirke strode away forward.

Mrs. Clyde, you may be sure, was not sorry to be left alone. Before her heart had quite settled down to its regular beating, the rattle of rowlocks drew nearer and nearer, and the gig shot out into the moonlight from under the loom of the land.

Though she kept no secrets from him, Mariette felt that she would prefer sleeping upon it, before confessing what had occurred to Tempest—specially as confidences that night must needs be interrupted. So she slipped down quietly to her cabin, and did not re-appear.

Ormskirke's manner, however, sufficed to give Noel a shrewd surmise of the truth. But he scarcely credited the other with such straightforward honesty of intention ; and he waited with some curiosity, to put it mildly, for the revelations of the morrow. Indeed, take it all in all, a scanty allowance of sound slumber was served out, *that* night, to the after-cabins of the *Procne*.





CHAPTER LX.

A "GOOD DAY" AT REDWOOD.

THU must be a stubborn evil temper that would not, to some extent, be mollified by the influences of a breezy South Coast morning ; and, truly, it did not seem as if the Black Horseman, under any disguise, was on the track of the ruddy wheels that flashed on so merrily, through sun and shade, along the pleasant bye-roads leading from Newburn to the Redwood Downs.

Ormskirke's temperament, in some respects, strongly resembled that of those valuable animals advertised by dog-fanciers as, "ready to take their death at any hand : " the more severe his punishment, the more certain he was to conceal the effects, and the sharp stab he had gotten overnight bled altogether inwardly. Mdme. de Vintimille, occupying the post of honour at his side, had not a suspicion that anything had gone amiss, and prattled on, happily unconscious that not one word in six had any meaning for her hearer. He was somewhat taciturn, to be sure ; but a heavy book on more than one of the approaching races might well account for this ; and, if he was rather hard on one self-willed leader, it should be remembered that the viscount, famous for his use of the single thong, was not averse to displaying his skill. More experienced eyes than those of the Wessex yokels looked on admiringly, as Ormskirke brought up his team, full of running after

their sharp ten-miles pull, and, wheeling on the trot, took up his accustomed position opposite the stand, and a little past the winning post.

"Quite a picter, aint it? And don't he know how to pick 'em?" remarked Jack Fleetwood—once a crack whip of the Western road, presently host of the Crown; and from the blink of his merry moist eye, you might divine that he approved of the passengers as well as the cattle.

Though it was but a hurried confidence, Mariette had managed, already, to make Tempest aware of what had happened over night, and—somewhat to her surprise—it seemed rather to please than annoy him.

She did not quite comprehend that, though he had ceased to be jealous, Ormskirke's demeanour towards herself had not seldom chafed Noel, and that it was no small relief to him to realise that honest intentions underlay that freedom of speech and manner.

The surprise to Mariette was a very agreeable one; for she had had certain misgivings as to the fashion in which her confession would be received. It needed only this to make her contentment complete; for last night had left with her neither remorse nor regret. Willow garlands were never twined for brows like her late wooer's; and, had she herself been quite a free agent, she would not have altered the course of events by a span. Whilst actually in Ormskirke's presence, she had tact enough to maintain a certain demureness of demeanour; but as he left the drag early in the day, and only returned at rare intervals, she was not constrained to put much check upon her wild spirits. The strange brilliancy of her aspect and manner was noted by not a few of her acquaintance that day, and remembered afterwards by some.

Every one has heard of the old Scotch superstition embodied in the word "fey." Highland cummers will tell you that a settled melancholy is less ominous of evil than that fitful gaiety, preluding death or disaster, even as sunsets, passing gorgeous, prelude storm.

No wonder that Ormskirke's luncheon was extensively patronised that day; or that many found in Mariette's ready wit and quick repartees, more savour and sparkle than in the dainty dishes or rare wine.

Early in the afternoon, Mrs. Clyde became aware that she was being watched intently by a pair of eyes that she seemed to recognise. They belonged to rather a good-looking, middle-aged man—a little over-dressed, perhaps, for the occasion; but of erect, soldierly bearing. Seeing that he was observed, he half lifted his hat, in the hesitating way of one who doubts whether his salute will be quite welcome. Something in the gesture supplied the broken link in Mariette's recollections. This was no other than the Captain Barrington mentioned in her letter to Pete Harradine.

Strong effects not seldom spring from prosaic causes. Yonder was a commonplace face enough; but, as Mariette looked on it, she shivered a little, as if into the fresh sea breeze there had come a sudden chill. The memory, that by dint of a powerful will and constant change of excitement, she had thrust, inch by inch, into the background, came to the front again menacingly. Piece by piece, scene by scene, the tragedy which had darkened her early womanhood, defined itself. She saw the straggling Irish street, as she had looked on it first through mist and rain; she heard, once more, the iron gate clang behind Archbold, going forth to his death. Plainer than all, she saw the small, square prison room, with its bare grey walls, and grated window, whence she herself had issued, not wholly free from the guilt of Cain.

We know with what marvellous rapidity a dream will print itself off on the brain. Not less swiftly, did all these spectres flit past Mariette's waking eyes. It spoke well for her self-command, that within twenty seconds of her recognising Captain Barrington, she could beckon him to come nearer, with as little show of surprise or discomposure as if they had parted yesterday.

He approached with that peculiar air—half bashful, half swaggering—characteristic of the honest "chalk-captain," treading on uncertain ground. But Mariette's greeting soon put him on terms with himself, and, a minute or two later, he was perched on the wheel, as much, apparently, at his ease, as any of the notables of turf and fashion, whom, whilst they occupied the like position, he had been watching with envious eyes.

In the 120th, it seemed there had been no more changes than usually occur in a marching regiment in peace time. Barrington himself was still only senior captain, and the stout chief was still to the fore. But they had lost their surgeon; for—assigning no reason for a step which took all his comrades by surprise—before the regiment left Ballynane, Jock Macallister had exchanged to India.

Not much more was said about the old times; and somehow both seemed inclined to change the subject to everyday topics, embracing, of course, the chances of the course. When the loungers round the drag began to thicken again, Barrington discreetly took his leave; but, before he departed, he besought Mrs. Clyde to mark the remainder of his card—"for luck." But to luck, though such a potent engine, in its way, could scarcely be attributed the large profits which rewarded the wary warrior for following implicitly the faint pencil dots. Some words, of graver import than low flatteries and gay *persiflage*, had been whispered in Mariette's ears on Redwood Downs.

Though she carried it off so gaily, this incident, for a while at least, rather abated the flow of her spirits. She had a vague presage that things were coming round again, almost too completely; and shrank within herself a little, like the travellers of old time, who, setting forth on a journey, marked a serpent glide across the path, or heard, from the left, the croak of a raven.

It was real "backer's" weather in the sky above; and, on the earth beneath, the backer's luck prevailed exceedingly. In private stands, and other such places, where the "fine flower" of our plunging youth congregate, the jubilation waxed higher and higher: whilst in the baited ring there was groaning and gnashing of teeth, with a ceaseless undercurrent of strong language, worthy of the Potteries. The most important race of the day, set late on in the afternoon, was carried off by the second favourite; and the winning number had scarcely gone up, when Mariette caught sight of Tempest's face, as he made slow way through the press. It was visibly paler than its wont; and she knew right well that one defeat would never change its colour.

But, when he came quite close, she asked no question;

neither did Noel speak till he was fairly settled at her side. Then he said, almost in a whisper—

"It would be tempting fortune—I'm not sure if it wouldn't be tempting Providence—to wager any more to-day. I don't know quite what we have won; but I know that, if to-morrow's like to-day, we'll not truckle at the week's end, to prince, peer, or Llama."

There was no time for more; for, even as her fingers closed stealthily round his, there was almost a throng round the drag, in which Ormskirke's stalwart figure was prominent.

The turfite fever was on the "wild viscount" now; and the thirst of triumph was on him, too, as, laughing exultingly, he grappled with a beaker of iced cup. Assuredly, he thought no more, just then, of "love-sick toys," than did his Norse ancestors, when, in mid-revel, they blew the foam off the mighty horns of metheglin.

Even M^{de}me. de Vintimille had, after her own fashion, had a "good day." For, amongst other frequenters of the Elms, Godfrey Parndon had rendered homage to his fair hostess; and had accepted a commission to back her fancy, which, oddly enough, coincided with his own, in a certain race for a very fair stake.

Altogether, it was a right pleasant homeward drive to Newburn; and if the roans—full of rest and provender—pulled till the tough sinews of their driver's arms ached again, it was a fault on the right side; and, for certain maladies of the mind, physical fatigue is no bad medicament. It had been previously settled that the whole party should dine, that night, at the Red Lion, and that the trio, who stuck to the ship, should go on board in a shore boat; for Ormskirke—never an austere, though an imperious, master—had given general liberty leave that night, and only the steward and the watch were left in charge of the *Progne*.





CHAPTER LXI.

"THEY'LL HOLD YOU TO THE VERY END."

THE port of Newburn was then little more than a broad reach of a tidal river, which narrowed again as it neared the sea, and for the last quarter-of-a-mile or so, ran between steep embankments. Some alluvial land had thus been gained on either side, but at the cost of materially increasing the strength of the current; and, at the ebb of certain spring tides, the out-flow was a sight worth seeing. At the extremity of either seawall was a rude pier, and a modest lighthouse much resembling an ancient dovecot; and, extending beyond low-water mark, a double row of tall piles, planted at wide intervals, marked out the proper channel.

The shore boat, ordered by Lord Ormskirke, was at the landing-place, just opposite the Red Lion, when, a little before midnight, he and his party came out. The weather had changed, but scarcely for the worse; for, though the wind was more fitful, it blew off the land; so that the water was smooth enough, and only light flakes of cloud flitted, **every** now and then, across the clear moon.

"We might save oars to-night," Ormskirke remarked, after a glance at the sky. Then he turned to the boatman.

"You've got a sail handy, of course. But will she carry one?"

Now, a Yorkshire couper is just as likely to speak the simple truth about a horse he has on sale, as is any one of these long-shore sailors to admit any defect in his own craft, be it large or small. Nevertheless, the man scratched his shaggy poll rather dubiously.

"I can get the sail in a minnit, my lord," he said, "and the boat's steady enough, for the matter o' that: but I think we'll hardly want it; the ebb's running out like a mill-sluice."

"All the more reason," Ormskirke rejoined. "Get the sail on her at once."

"You are well sure there is no danger?" Mdme. de Vintimille queried. She had come out, cloaked and hooded, to see the others start.

The viscount laughed, a little scornfully.

"Danger," he said. "My dear lady, there's more risk on any Swiss lake, on an autumn day, than lies between here and the *Procne*. If it were not for that corner of land, you would see us aboard in ten minutes."

Mrs. Clyde and Tempest, who had been standing somewhat apart, joined the others here; and they stood talking over the programme of the morrow, till all was ready. Ormskirke himself took the helm, and the boatman held the sheet, which was not made fast, but only passed round a thwart with a single turn.

With the ebb fairly under her, and the breeze right aft, the little craft soon settled into her speed; and, in an incredibly short time the last elbow of the embankment was cleared, and the slender spars of the *Procne* stood out against the moonlight, some third of a mile away.

Even within the last few minutes the wind had shifted a point or so; and they were just clear of the lighthouse, when there came a sharp flaw from the west. In such catastrophes there is usually some strange fatality, or concatenation of chances, hard to account for. The boatman was groping under the thwart for a jack-knife he had dropped a minute before; and Ormskirke, turning his head to answer some question of Mariette's, was not looking to his steering. No one knows how these things happen. But,

before a thought of danger occurred to any one of the party, the crank craft struck one of the marking piles, almost broadside on, and sank like a cockle-shell.

Ormskirke's foot had got jammed under a ledge in the steerage; and though he was a strong and practised swimmer, he was blind and breathless when he came to the surface. Almost as he rose the tide swept him against one of the piles, and he clutched it mechanically. As he shook the water out of his eyes, he was aware of a quick panting close to his ear; and recognised that Tempest had already gained that same point of refuge. It was supposed afterwards that the boatman had been, somehow, stunned in the first concussion; for he was never seen, dead or alive, after the boat swamped.

"Where is she?" Ormskirke asked eagerly, as soon as he could find breath for speech.

Tempest did not answer—perhaps he could not. But he looked over his shoulder, and, following the direction of his eyes, the other discerned Mariette clinging to another pile, a few fathoms further out to sea. She had had a few swimming lessons, as a girl; and, though she was helpless in that furious current, her poor skill had sufficed to keep her afloat till she gained that precarious resting-place. She had not shrieked when the first shock came, and neither cry nor moan escaped her now. But the moon was so bright, that, even at that distance, those other two could see that her lips were moving, and that her face was deathly pale.

Perhaps, of all living men, none was better fitted for such an emergency than the "wild viscount;" for he was as brave as steel, and, for the nonce, cool as granite. Twice—thrice, his mighty voice rang across the water, hailing the *Progne*; and, almost instantly, lights, moving hurriedly on board, showed that the summons had been heard and comprehended. Indeed, though he did not guess who was on board the craft, the sudden disappearance of the little white sail had already alarmed the watch. Then Ormskirke spoke again, slowly and steadily.

"Mrs. Clyde—Mariette—keep a good heart, and don't cling so tightly as to waste your strength; we shall have help soon—very soon—they're lowering a boat now."

Though he spoke so cheerily, there was little cheer in his face as he muttered to himself:

"My God!—if she can only hold on."

The words may not sound very devout; but they were liker an orison than any that had passed those lips for many a long day.

All this while Tempest had kept perfect silence, slowly recovering his breath; and, when he spoke at last, his voice, too, was quite steady.

"Good-bye," he said. "I am but a poor swimmer; but I think I can manage to fetch yonder pile. At any rate, I can but try."

"Yonder pile?" the other retorted, hoarsely. "Where *she* is, you mean? You'll do more harm than good there; and may hamper, without helping her. No man living—once swept loose—could do more than hold his own in this current."

"You may be right," Tempest answered, quietly; and I may be very wrong-headed. But—once more—I can but try."

A gleam of angry jealousy flashed out of Ormskirke's eyes.

"And what right have *you* to interfere?" he asked.

The faint smile flickering round Noel's lip was tinged with irony.

"Not much of a right, as things go, now-a-days. She's my wife—that's all. We were married twelve months ago."

Ormskirke started violently, and a quick convulsion of wrath crossed his face; but, the next instant, his jaws were clenched like those of a stubborn patient under a surgeon's scalpel. His heart was very full of bitterness just then. So he had been hoodwinked, and trifled with, and used for a purpose; and the deepest passion of his life had furnished good jesting matter for those two, betwixt their caresses. A horrible temptation beset him, to smite and disfigure the calm handsome face, then within his arm's-length; or to try whether his rival's luck would prevail through a death-grapple. But, as you have heard, this man was not wholly given over to Satan; and more generous impulses followed. Had he been so wronged, after all? Twelve months ago

were not he and Mariette Clyde strangers? And was not any man, then, free to woo and win her? And, since then, had she coquetted with him more cruelly, or deluded him more basely, than hundreds would have done who flaunt their marriage-contracts like a banner? Only last night, had she not spoken truth, if not the whole truth? He felt that he could forgive her, and even tell her so. But, before he could put thought into words, the other went on speaking.

"The secret was well kept, wasn't it? But, this week, all the world might have known it, if ——"

His face was grave, even to sadness, now; and, surely, some strange moisture softened the fiery Eastern eyes. To do him justice, it was not craven fear, or even selfish regrets, that moved this worldling then, almost to tears. He was thinking of his late day-dreams, and how they were like to end; for, judging from the strain on his own sinews and endurance, he knew that the chances of any woman's holding out till help arrived were faint indeed. The cup, the plenishing whereof had cost so much thought and pains, was just full; and now it was to be shattered utterly when the lips for which it was destined, had barely brushed its brim. There had grown up within him, of late, an earnestness of purpose, and a firmness of loyalty, quite at variance with the tenor of his past life; and, at this supreme moment, on his own future—severed from Mariette's—he did not waste one thought.

"I must start now," Tempest went on almost immediately. "There need be no ill-blood between us. I believe you meant honestly by her; and she might have fared better if she had known you first. Once more—good-bye."

Before the other could put forth a hand to arrest him, Noel had cast himself loose; and, turning his face seaward, was borne away by the current. More, perhaps, by chance than skill, he struck the pile to which Mariette was clinging, and gained firm handhold there.

The fitful gust, which had wrought all the mischief, was followed by a long lull; and, to Ormskirke's ears, sharpened by the tension of excitement, every sound came distinctly through the still night air.

"I knew you would come," Mariette said, faintly. "I

am glad ; yet I am sorry, too. You will drown if you try to save me—me, who would have died for you long ago. Darling—kiss me once ; and don't touch me again. I *must* cling to you, if you are too near. Ah!—isn't it hard?"

There was a pause, and then Tempest answered, quietly.

"Not touch you? When you talked of parting that night at the Elms, what did I answer? 'If everything else slips through my fingers, they'll hold you all the tighter; and they'll hold you to the very end.'"

All this Ormskirke heard: he heard something else, too—the dash of oars from seaward; and he shouted once again, not imperiously, as was his wont, but piteously, bidding his men, for God's love, to make more speed. But, before another minute had lapsed, there came back over the swirling water a voice, weak and broken, like the voices we hear in dreams.

"The kiss—the kiss—I am going."

The two heads met; and, for some seconds, seemed as one. Then Tempest loosened one arm from the timber, and wound it round Mariette's waist, striving desperately, but vainly, to retain his hold with the other. And then, the pile stood out against the moonlight—bare.

A cry of wrath and horror rang out on the night, as Ormskirke cast himself on the mercy of the current, plunging down madly to the rescue. But strongly as he swam, the ebb tide was stronger or wilier than he; and the dreadful under-tow, having once drawn down its victims, held them fast. The *Progne's* boat was barely in time to pick up, in the last stage of exhaustion, the sole survivor of those who had floated off so merrily from Newburn quay.

Though he died before his prime, there were set down, probably, to Noel Tempest's charge not a few broken vows. But his very last pact with a woman was kept to the letter. When, after infinite toil and pains, those two corpses were recovered, they were locked together not less closely than the paired victims of the *Noyades*; only, here, the bands were not of hemp or metal, but of stiffened flesh and frozen blood.

Does this seem too strange to be true? Well: in fiction,

at least, the case has parallels. The writer of "Our Mutual Friend" was not prone to indulge in wild improbabilities; and—remember—when they drew Rogue Riderhood out of the lock, "he was girdled still with Bradley Headstone's iron ring; and the rivets of the iron ring held fast."





CHAPTER LXII.

EPILOGUE.

POSSIBLY, sometimes, there may be slight profit in a prologue. Supposing yourself to have gotten together a company of guests, on whose indulgence you may reckon—answering, for the most part, to the old All Soul's qualification—it may do no harm to give them, thus, some slight foretaste of the fare provided for their entertainment. But an elaborate epilogue—*à quoi bon ?* For appetite must be sated by this time, if not cloyed. If any of the light cates have been found toothsome, it is well : if otherwise, it cannot now be amended ; he that is weary, let him be weary still, and, so, depart in peace.

Therefore, these “more last words” shall be brief.

Hugh Standish's convalescence, though it received no check, was very slow ; and, when bodily vigour had quite returned, the inward change did not pass away. He had no fits of depression, and no settled melancholy : but he had grown more grave and thoughtful, for his years ; and rather shrank from, now, than sought society.

If Piers Coniston had not thoroughly realised all this, it may be he would have held out longer in his sage resolve, of keeping his ward and his daughter apart. But it somehow seemed to him that he had now quite another man to deal with in Hugh ; and that the taint of the Standish blood might well have been purged, as by fire. And, curiously

enough—for it was a terrible risk, no doubt—the result proved Piers to have been not a whit over sanguine. Whilst he lived, Standish never again touched card or dice, or risked the smallest coin on any chance or hazard. In after times, when he could speak of these things freely, he confessed that he had never, since his illness, had to resist even the shadow of a temptation; for liking, as has happened in other cases, had passed into utter loathing.

That the married life of Hugh and Sybil was happy none who knew them could doubt. But they were happy in a very quiet way, of which the world had little cognisance. Though Standish, after his mother's death, did his duty fairly by his own estate, they spent more of their time at Herncourt than at Cheersley; and no friend or comrade ever ousted "Uncle Piers" from the first place in Hugh's love and confidence. So if the picture, the outlines of which had been in Coniston's mind so long, was produced at last, in soberer colours than he had imagined for it, they were, perhaps, more enduring. At any rate, the effect more than satisfied *him*.

Alice found a bridegroom as blithe and petulant as herself; and in these two lives, at least, there is mirth, and to spare.

Horace Morland, if he fulfilled not the measure of his own expectations, throve, on the whole, well. But, somehow, even keen mercantile men did not seem to care so much about dealing with the house, in its changed condition; and, to satisfy his ambition, Horace was almost forced to engage in operations in which some risk was involved. He was worsted, some time ago, in some large "cornering" operations; and certain wise men of the East profess to mistrust his future. That name is never mentioned at Herncourt or Cheersley. A general remark of Coniston's, to the effect that he and Morland could not agree in business matters, quite satisfied Standish. It is possible that he had his own suspicions; but he did not care to stir one memory of yonder terrible time.

In a modest *maisonnette*, on the very lip of the Mediterranean, dwells a devout dame, noted for her charities withal. She rarely goes far beyond the tamarisk hedge of her pretty garden; and has no visitors, save the parish

auré—a mild old epicurean, who holds the dainty repast, provided for him each Sunday, a fair set-off against all the week's "mortifications." Gaston de Keramour—tarrying at Antibes for a night, on his way to Nice, to visit an ancient and wealthy godmother—met this lady returning from vespers, and recognised her. But it was so evident that she wished to avoid the *rencontre*, that the ex-diplomat contented himself with a distant salute, and passed by on the other side. It may be that, in all this, there is neither affectation nor hypocrisy. In the southern temperament, religious reactions are not uncommon; and the shock which made Alured of Ormskirke graver and gentler for the rest of his days, may well have sobered gay Félicie de Vintimille.

The tidings of the Newburn catastrophe caused less stir in Montserrat House than in many *pauperum tabernis*, where the names of the sufferers were heard for the first time. But for a full hour after he had read that paragraph, and laid the paper down, the marquis sat, without stirring a finger—staring straight before him, with hard, unblinking eyes; and, from time to time, the cruel mouth worked as though in pain. Could Noel Tempest have returned from the Silent Land, and standing there in his old place have put again the question you wot of, he might have been answered, perchance, in another fashion. But that secret, like many another of greater import, has gone down into the deep sea.

Though, perhaps, besides Félicie de Vintimille she had not one mourner of her own sex, not a few wreaths of regret were, figuratively speaking, cast on Mariette Clyde's grave. Few of these, of course, were woven of *immortelles*; and not many, after they had once faded, were renewed: nevertheless, all those slight funeral tributes were given willingly. Certain men, proof against any ordinary emotion, were conscious of a little sinking of the heart, as they realised, not without difficulty, that the gay, ringing voice was dumb, the mutinous mouth set, and the brilliant eyes quenched for ever. None, at least were moved to judge her harshly, or even according to the very letter of the law.

If any, whose patience has lasted out thus far, should feel more austere, let them—remembering that she could be

attainted for no shameful sin—allow, at least, extenuating circumstances. Not to all who are sent forth in tender age, to wander barefoot through the wilderness, does the luck pertain of Him from whose loins sprang all those dukes and kings whose names read like some grand chivalric muster-roll. And the key-note of many of these stories is struck in Mariette's own words.

“I never had a chance—a fair chance—even as a little child.”

THE END.

Harry Muir:

A Story of Scottish Life.

By Mrs. Oliphant.

"We prefer 'Harry Muir' to most of the Scottish novels that have appeared since Gait's domestic stories. This new tale, by the author of 'Margaret Maitland,' is a real picture of the weakness of man's nature and the depths of woman's kindness. The narrative, to repeat our praise, is not one to be entered on or parted from without our regard for its writer being increased."—*Athenæum*.

Ombra.

By Mrs. Oliphant.

"This story is very carefully constructed. It has been written with sedulous pains, and there is no lack of individuality about any of the characters. The customary grace of the author's style, the high tone of mind, the ready and frank sympathies which have always characterised her, are found in this book, as in its predecessors; but here is something that they, not even the best among them, have not. She has never produced a rival to Kate Courtenay."—*Spectator*.

Squire Arden.

By Mrs. Oliphant.

"Mrs. Oliphant's new book will not diminish her already established reputation. The plot is interesting and well managed, the scene well laid, and the characters various and forcibly described."—*Athenæum*.

Madonna Mary.

By Mrs. Oliphant.

"From first to last 'Madonna Mary' is written with evenness and vigour, and overflows with the best qualities of its writer's fancy and humour. The story is thoroughly original, as far as its plot and leading incidents are concerned; and the strength of the narrative is such that we question if any reader will lay it aside, notwithstanding the fullness in his throat, and the constriction of his heart, until he has shared in the happiness which is liberally assigned to the actors of the drama before the falling of the green curtain."—*Athenæum*.

The Last of the Mortimers.

By Mrs. Oliphant.

"'The Last of the Mortimers' has given us much pleasure. It is not only good in itself, but is quite as clever in its way as 'Mrs. Margaret Maitland,' and has something stronger in the fibre of its romance. It is the most powerful and most interesting novel by this authoress, and the world will thank her for more tales as good and as amusing."—*Globe*.

The House on the Moor.

By Mrs. Oliphant,

Author of "May," "Ombra," etc.

"This story is very interesting, and the interest deepens as the story proceeds."—*Athenæum*.

For Love and Life.

By Mrs. Oliphant,
Author of "Squire Arden."

"'For Love and Life' is equal in all respects to the reputation of its writer. It will be read with delight."—*John Bull*.

"This novel is well worth reading. The story is interesting, the plot is original, and every character is a study."—*Daily News*.

May.

By Mrs. Oliphant,
Author of "Magdalen Hepburn."

"'May' is one of the best novels of the year. The Fifeshire scenes are admirable bits of that quiet landscape painting in which Mrs. Oliphant excels."—*Athenæum*.

"'May' is one of the freshest and most charming of Mrs. Oliphant's creations."—*Blackwood's Magazine*.

Heart and Cross.

By Mrs. Oliphant.

"A delightful work. The interest is preserved from the opening to the closing page."—*Post*.

Beautiful Edith.

By the Author of "Ursula's Love Story."

"We have no hesitation in placing 'Beautiful Edith' among the very best novels that have been issued for a long period. It will become widely popular. The author possesses a charming style, and a talent for quiet humour."—*Messenger*.

Magdalen Hepburn

A Story of the Scottish
Reformation.

By Mrs. Oliphant,
Author of "May," "Harry Muir."

"'Magdalen Hepburn' will sustain the reputation which the author has acquired. It is a well prepared and carefully executed picture of the state of society and manners in Scotland at the dawn of the Reformation. John Knox is faithfully drawn."—*Athenæum*.

Colonel Dacre.

By the Author of "Caste," "Pearl,"
"Bruna's Revenge," etc.

"There is much that is attractive both in Colonel Dacre and the simple-hearted girl whom he honours with his love."—*Athenæum*.

"Colonel Dacre is a gentleman throughout, which character is somewhat rare in modern novels."—*Fall Mall Gazette*.

Lisabee's Love Story.

By Miss Betham Edwards.

"This book is a very good one. There is real beauty in the title of 'Lisabee's Love Story,' a tale so simple and idyllic in its nature that the Laureate himself might have uttered it in verse as companion to the 'Dora' and 'Gardener's Daughter,' to the 'Enoch Arden,' and 'The Aylmer's Field.'"—*Examiner*.

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